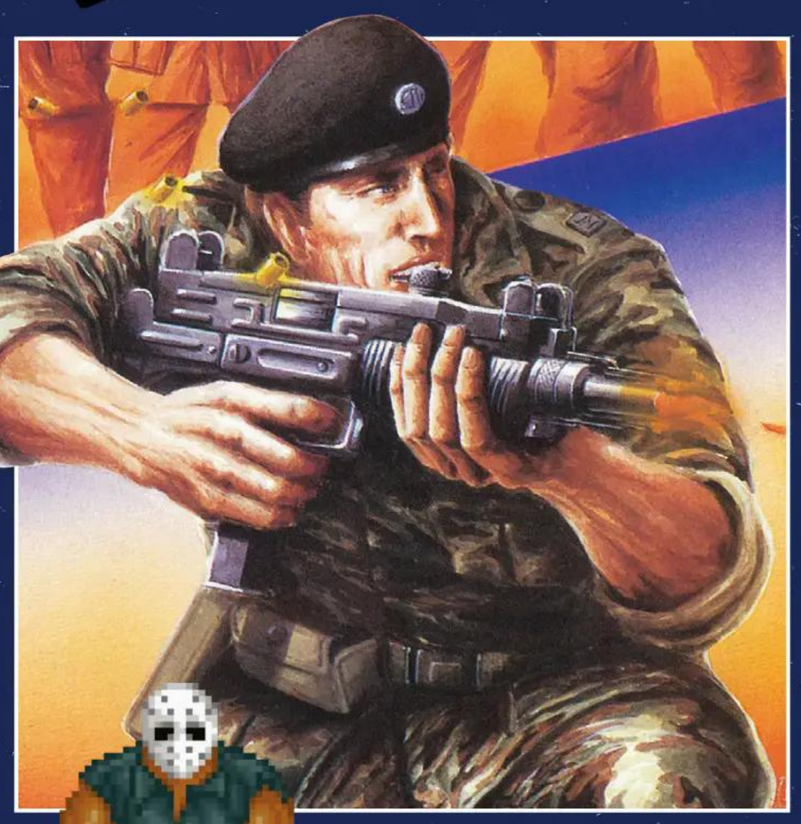
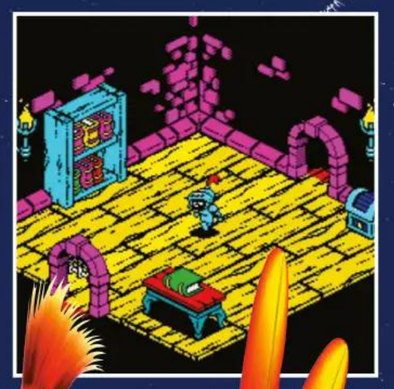
OLD!

retro GAMER ANNUAL

Vol. 13

PC | SONY | SEGA | NINTENDO | SINCLAIR | SNK | ATARI | COMMODORE | COIN-OP | MOBILE





Digital Edition

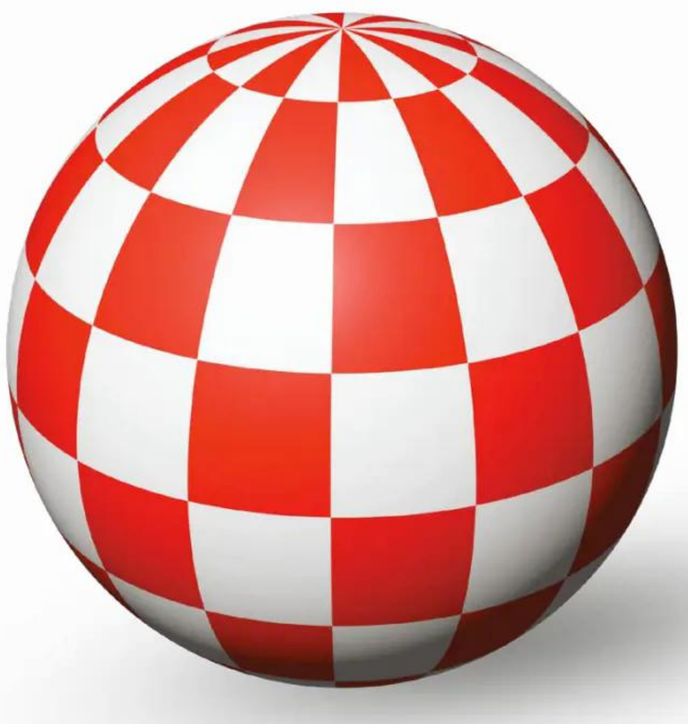
THIRTEENTH EDITION

FUTURE

WELCOME TO THE

retro GAMER ANNUAL

Where do you stand when it comes to retro gaming? Do you prefer the early 8-bit days when pixels ruled all, or are you a fan of the exciting 3D era of gaming that seemed to be everywhere in the mid-Nineties? No matter your preference, you'll find our latest annual impossible to ignore as it's chock-full of amazing retro gaming goodness. We kick things off with a look back at the ZX Spectrum, one of the most successful computers of the Eighties. It's not the only hardware celebrated, as we also revisit Microsoft's Xbox 360 and Commodore's amazing range of Amigas. A number of Japanese developers also feature and share stories on how they created several excellent games, from the magnificent *Shadow Of The Colossus* to the lightgun blaster *Operation Wolf* and the hit ninja series *Shinobi*. We also find time to revisit several big franchises for our Evolution Of series, including Rare's *Banjo-Kazooie*, Nintendo's *Metroid Prime* and Sony's *God Of War*. Regardless of your thoughts on retro gaming, this latest book highlights just how varied and interesting the subject is. Enjoy.



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THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO CLASSIC VIDEOGAMING

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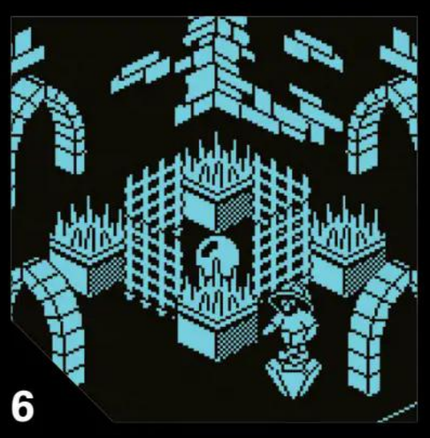
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THE LEGACY OF THE ZX SPECTRUM

THE ZX SPECTRUM IS THE BELOVED BRITISH MICRO THAT WAS MORE THAN JUST A SALES SUCCESS – IT PLAYED A PIVOTAL ROLE IN SHAPING THE UK GAMES INDUSTRY. JOIN US AND A NUMBER OF INDUSTRY VETERANS AS WE CHAMPION THE INFLUENCE OF THE LITTLE COMPUTER THAT COULD

WORDS BY MARTYN CARROLL

Of all the ZX Spectrums that rolled off the production line at the Timex factory in Dundee, there was one unique edition – a single white model that was produced specially for Sir Clive Sinclair to celebrate one million sales of his computer.

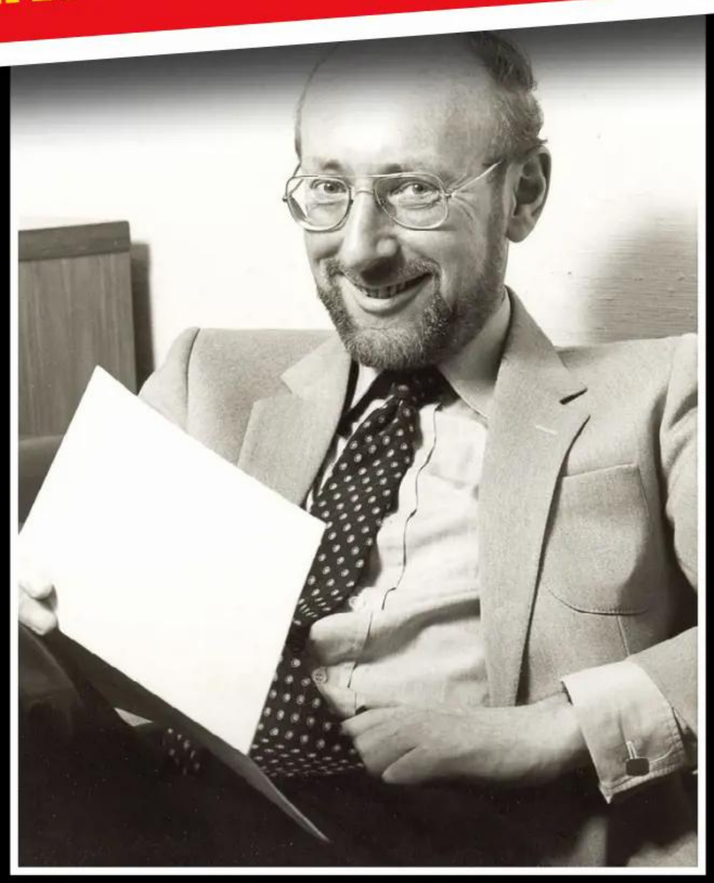
This milestone was achieved in December 1983, just 20 months after the Spectrum's launch. It was a significant achievement, when you consider how many rival computers were vying for attention during the home micro boom of the early Eighties. Despite its obvious shortcomings – a rubber keyboard, single-channel sound and the infamous 'colour clash' – the Spectrum managed to strike the perfect balance between cost and capability. Crucially, it was well-specced for gaming due to its fast Z80 CPU, colour graphics and ample RAM. Thanks to sales of the Spectrum, Sinclair would become the UK's leading home-computer manufacturer, accounting for around 40% of the UK market.

"I WAS STILL AT SCHOOL WHEN I STARTED TESTING ULTIMATE'S FIRST SPECTRUM GAMES"
HUW WARD

The Spectrum's true success, however, transcends sales and smiling accountants. By making computers more affordable and accessible, it sparked a passion for programming in many users. Furthermore, it provided a low-cost path into commercial software development, creating a bedroom coding culture where individuals and small teams could create and publish their own games. It was an unprecedented time and many well-known developers and software studios emerged from the scene. The archetypal Spectrum success story is surely Ultimate, which was founded in 1982 by brothers Chris and Tim Stamper. After making their name with a string of Spectrum hits, they would establish Rare in 1985. Over the next decade the studio would achieve global success, becoming a second-party Nintendo developer and latterly a first-party Microsoft studio. It has come a long way from the small outfit that thrilled kids with games like *Jetpac* and *Atic Atac*.

One of those kids was Huw Ward of Leicestershire. "At the time I loved the Spectrum," he says. "It was my introduction to computing. I used to do what everyone else did at the time and type in code listings from magazines. Later I remember buying a snazzy special tape deck to load games." Very typical, yet the games Huw was loading were anything but. "I was still at school when I started testing Ultimate's first Spectrum games," he continues. Through a family connection, Huw found himself appointed chief – or rather, only – tester of Ultimate's latest creations. "They used to bring a new tape over each night for me to test the next day." Can you imagine? You're doing your geography homework and the Stampers pop round with a copy of a little something called *Sabre Wulf*?

Ultimate burnt brightly, but briefly, on the Spectrum. In early 1986, the Stampers sold the Ultimate label to US Gold and shifted their focus to Rare, a brand-new studio they'd set up to develop games for Nintendo's NES console. Tim Stamper later revealed that they felt they'd gone as far as they could with the Spectrum, and to ▶



» Britain's favourite boffin and 'father' of the Spectrum, Sir Clive Marles Sinclair.

» Rick Dickinson was the Spectrum's industrial designer. He created the case and the famous 'dead flesh' keyboard.

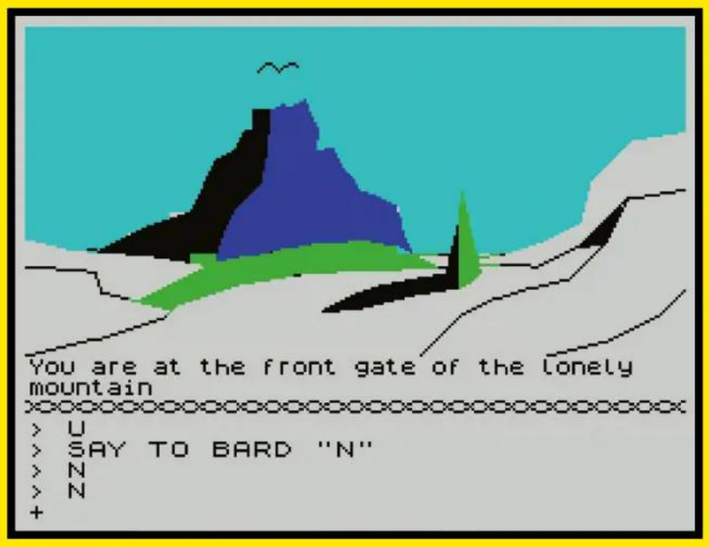
GAMES OF GREAT IMPORT

THE SPECTRUM ORIGINALS THAT INSPIRED GREAT THINGS

FOOTBALL MANAGER

1982

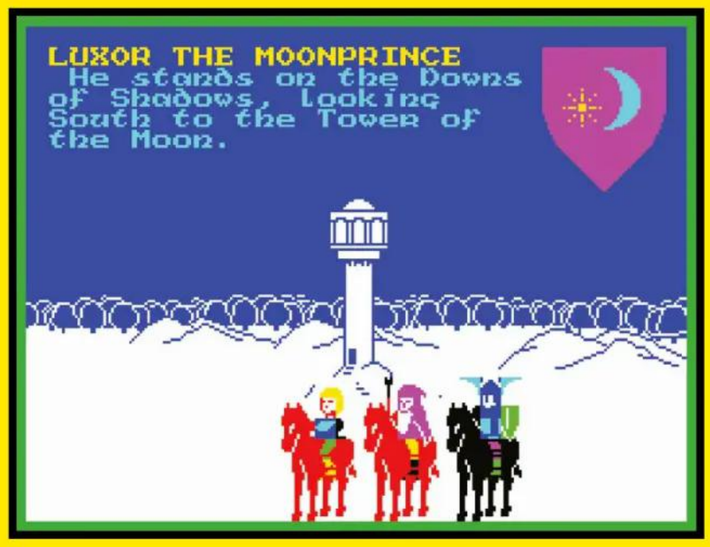
■ Although Kevin Toms' original version was released for the Video Genie (a Tandy TRS-80 clone), it was his expanded Spectrum version, complete with animated match highlights, that truly established the management sim formula that's still addicting footy fans to this day.



THE HOBBIT

1982

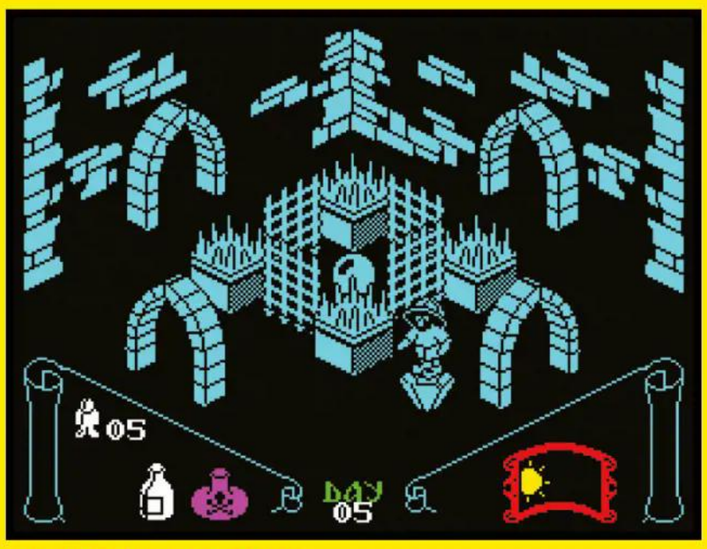
■ *The Hobbit* was the title that took interactive fiction from the mainframe to the mainstream. Featuring an intelligent parser, independent characters and non-linear progression, as well as rudimentary location graphics, it set new standards for adventure games.



THE LORDS OF MIDNIGHT

1984

■ Mike Singleton's sprawling fantasy was billed as the first 'epic' computer game and that wasn't hyperbole. Featuring almost 4,000 locations, 32 characters and multiple routes to victory, the game was a clear and significant influence on the open-world strategy genre.



KNIGHT LORE

1984

■ *Ant Attack* brought isometric 3D thrills to the Spectrum, but it was *Knight Lore* that created the blueprint that led to countless clones, including *Fairlight* and *Head Over Heels*. Kudos to Ultimate, who casually dropped this as Sabreman's *third* adventure.

TURBO ESPRIT

1986

■ Long before the 3D open worlds of *Driver* and *GTA*, Mike Richardson created this technically superb driving game featuring living, breathing cities complete with traffic lights, zebra crossings and little workmen up ladders who you absolutely didn't try to cripple.

THE SACRED ARMOUR OF ANTIRIAD

1986

■ Displaying similarities with *Metroid*, Palace's platform-adventure game pioneered non-linear exploration on 8-bit computers. Its map was fairly small, but the level of ambition on display was huge.

HUW WARD

■ Ultimate's original game tester would go on to spend the rest of his career with Rare.

STE PICKFORD

■ Along with his brother John, Ste has enjoyed a respected 40+ year career in videogames.

CHARLES CECIL

■ Game designer Charles started out at Artic Computing and cofounded Revolution in 1989.

RUPERT GOODWINS

■ Sinclair programmer Rupert worked on the Spectrum 128 and the later Amstrad models.

JARROD BENTLEY

■ Spectrum homebrew hero Jarrod has created, and contributed to, dozens of releases.

» Rare team members outside their Twycross base. That's Tim Stamper on the far left, standing next to wife Carol and brother Chris.

THE BIG PLAYERS

STUDIOS THAT MINED GOLD ON THE SPECTRUM

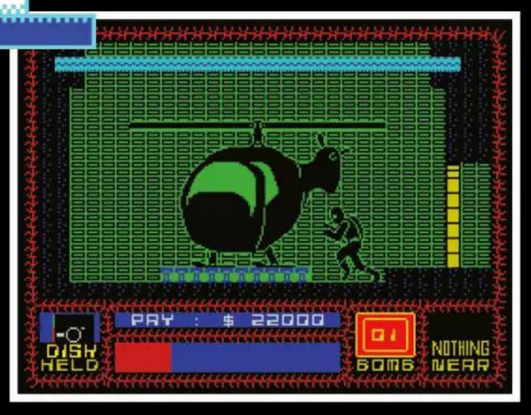
ULTIMATE PLAY THE GAME

■ Who else? For many, Ultimate was *the* software house during the Spectrum's early years, thanks to a mostly unbroken chain of hits beginning with 1983's *Jetpac* (pictured). Just two years later, Ultimate's key people would establish Rare and global success soon followed.

OCEAN

■ The leading UK software house of the Eighties and early Nineties actually started out in 1983 as Spectrum Games, publishing arcade rip-offs like *Caterpilla* and *Road Frog* (pictured). Far greater things would soon follow. The Ocean name was swallowed up by Infogrames in 1998.

DURELL



■ The success of *Harrier Attack* and *Scuba Dive* on the Spectrum propelled this small developer into the big leagues, before hits like *Combat Lynx* and *Saboteur* (pictured) kept it there – until 1987, at least, when the firm quit games development to focus on financial software.

GRAFTGOLD Creative Software

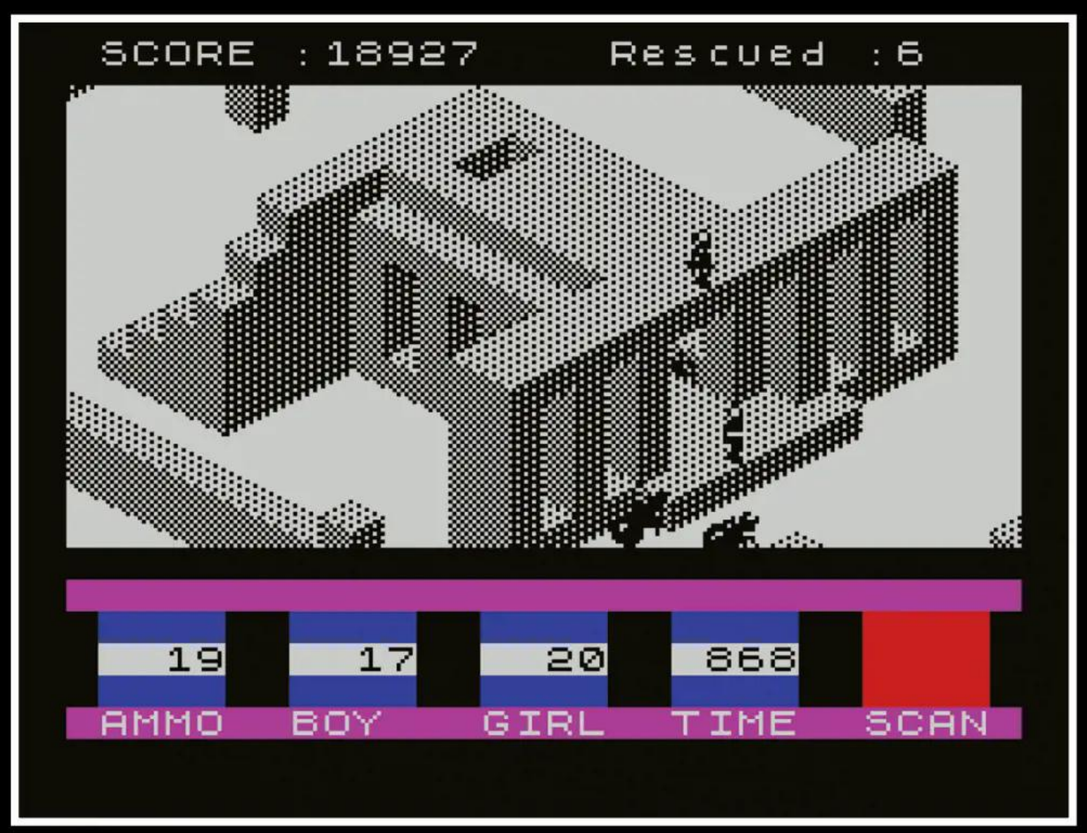
■ Graftgold's origins stretch back to 1983, when founder Steve Turner developed *3D Space Wars* (pictured) for the Spectrum. Successful partnerships with Hewson and multiple other publishers kept Graftgold alive and kicking until circumstances saw it shut up shop in 1998.

GREMLIN

■ Initially operating out of a Sheffield computer shop, Gremlin would become one of the most dependable Spectrum developers thanks to successes like *Wanted! Monty Mole* and *Jack The Nipper* (pictured). Gremlin soldiered on until 2003 and its legacy lives on in studios like Sumo.

Codemasters

■ Not strictly a Spectrum studio, but Codemasters enjoyed huge success on the system, thanks to budget-priced gems like *BMX Simulator* (pictured) and the *Dizzy* series. In the Nineties it branched out into consoles and is still active, having been acquired by EA in 2021.



» [ZX Spectrum] The ground-breaking isometric adventure *Ant Attack*, developed by Sandy White and published by Quicksilva in 1983.

» [ZX Spectrum] Mervyn Estcourt's *Deathcase* was developed for the core 16KB Spectrum, yet it's hailed as one of the system's finest games.

expand meant new (Eastern) horizons. "They went to an overseas game show and saw the opportunity in the Nintendo system," says Huw. "They already knew the late, great Joel Hochberg from when they'd worked in arcade development and he helped broker the deal with Nintendo. They grabbed it by the horns and what a great decision that was." Following the 1987 release of *Bubbler*, Ultimate's final game under US Gold, Huw hopped over to Rare, where console development was gaining momentum. Over the next five years Rare would grow into a multi-team development juggernaut that released around 60 titles for the NES, Game Boy and Mega Drive. "At Ultimate they were more of a two-man band, but at Rare the brothers had teams that they oversaw so it ended up being different," says Huw. "But saying that, Tim always liked to have design input into the games, and Chris was always interested in the engineering side." In this respect, the ethos of those early Ultimate days lived on.

One of the developers who joined Rare as it expanded was designer and illustrator Ste Pickford. He started out on the Spectrum, working alongside his brother John creating games like *Glider Rider*, *Zub* and *Feud*. It was here that he honed the skills for a life-long career in videogames. "The main lesson from working on the Spectrum and other 8-bit machines was to be lean and efficient at all times," he shares. "In modern development people talk about 'optimising' as something you do towards the end of development, to make it efficient later on. With machines like the Spectrum that wasn't possible. You had to plan with the utmost efficiency right from the start if you wanted to make a game that was going to fit into 48KB. It's a bit of a lost art now, to work that way. And perhaps a bit of a waste of time, as modern systems treat RAM and storage more dynamically. But working on the Spectrum instilled in me an instinct, and a strong habit, to make every graphic or asset as efficient as it can possibly be, and I try to never waste a single byte." He then adds, laughing, "Nobody notices though!"

» [ZX Spectrum] If we could distil the entire Spectrum scene into a single screenshot, this is undoubtedly it.

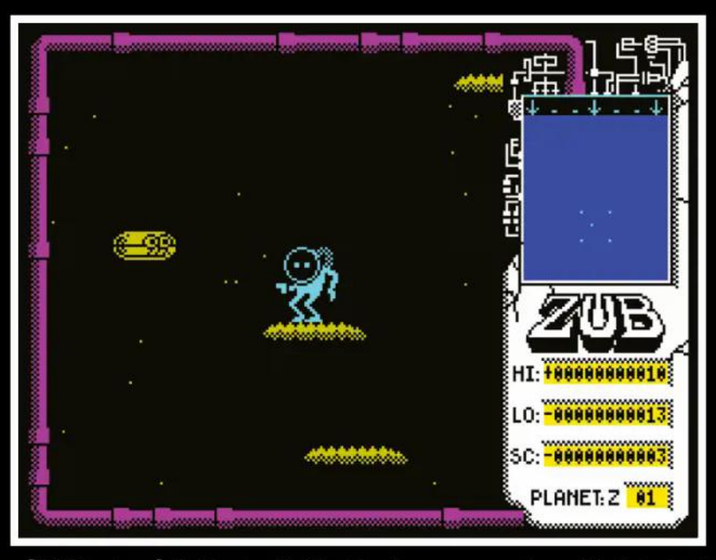
> "LOADS OF PEOPLE WHO STARTED OFF IN THEIR BEDROOMS MAKING SPECTRUM GAMES ENDED UP WORKING ON MASSIVE AAA TITLES"
> **STE PICKFORD**

Conversely, Ste remembers things that needed to be reconsidered as the industry matured, particularly when making games for Nintendo consoles. "The move to consoles demanded a level of professionalism that we didn't have previously. It wasn't so much about bugs – although a lot of Spectrum games were buggy – it was more that Nintendo expected every game to be able to be *finished*. And the developer had to prove it could be finished, typically by providing a video of it being played to completion. When making Spectrum games we often just made the game go harder and harder, until presumably it would eventually crash. We'd play it as far as we were able, and assume better players would get further than us, but that was as far as it went. It never occurred to us that we had to be able to finish the games ourselves on the Spectrum."

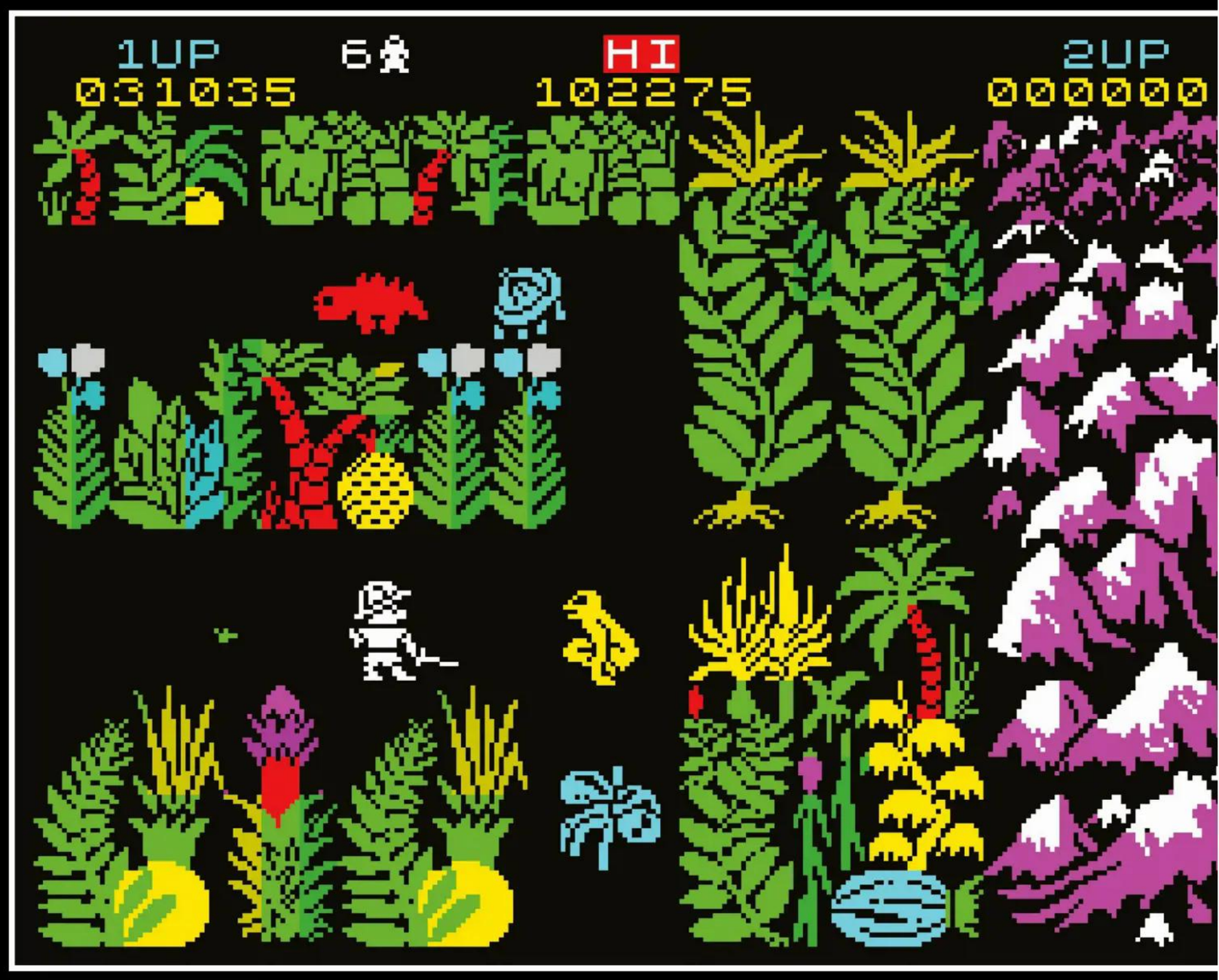
Quality control issues aside, it's clear that those formative, less formal years were crucial in establishing the UK's videogame industry on the global stage – and the Spectrum played a starring role. "I point to the Spectrum in particular, more so than the Commodore 64, because it had no hardware support for sprites or scrolling or anything, and was incredibly underpowered," says Ste. "To get a sprite moving on the Spectrum was already an achievement, really, so anyone who managed to program a whole game in assembler was probably in the top 5% of developers around. Programmers and designers had to get really inventive, trying to make something work within the Spectrum's limited capabilities, and ended up making some really interesting and innovative games. Loads of people who started off in their bedrooms making Spectrum games ended up working on massive AAA titles at big studios in the US, because the Spectrum birthed a generation of incredible coders and inventive game designers."

From small acorns, as they say (and we're not talking about the Electron). Another developer who has seen great things grow from humble beginnings is Charles Cecil, cofounder of Revolution Software. Charles' story predates the Spectrum, beginning with Sinclair's first home computer, the ZX80, and Artic Computing. "Artic was started by my friend Richard Turner,

» [ZX Spectrum] *Rebelstar* by Julian Gollop was the precursor to his acclaimed *XCOM* series.



» [ZX Spectrum] *Zub* by the Pickford brothers was another of their budget titles that outshone many full-price releases.



» [ZX Spectrum] *Sabre Wulf*, starring Sabreman, was the first of Ultimate's premium big box releases

▶ whose mother offered him either a party or a Sinclair ZX80 for his 18th birthday. He chose the latter and started writing and publishing games on the ZX80 and ZX81. Other machines were available but the publishers at the time tended to stick to the formats they knew, selling games to a community that was loyal to that format. One evening, Richard pointed out that I enjoyed telling stories and suggested that if I write a text adventure game, he would code and publish it. So I did, he did, and the rest is history."

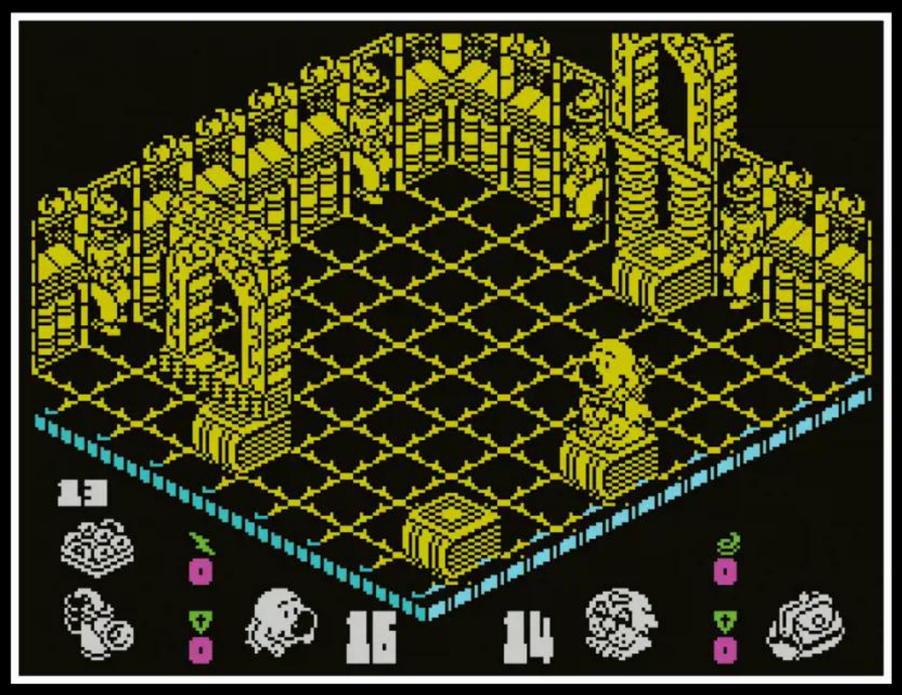
> "WE WERE THE PIONEERS. WE WERE NOT AFRAID TO INNOVATE BOTH CREATIVELY AND COMMERCIALLY"
> **CHARLES CECIL**

Charles' early adventure games – *Planet Of Death* and *Inca Curse* – helped put Artic on the map and ultimately planted the seed that led to Revolution and games like *Lure Of The Temptress* and *Broken Sword*. And Charles was able to carry forward the experience gained during those early Artic days. "We were the pioneers," he says. "We were not afraid to innovate both creatively and commercially. One example: ICL had an exclusive agreement with WHSmith, the main UK retailer at the time. The problem was that ICL was a business software company and its 'games' were dull. So one Saturday, Richard visited his local store and asked them to take some Artic games on a sale or return basis. All the games sold in a few hours and he was asked to bring more. The branch manager reported this back to head office, and WHSmith started stocking games from Artic and other publishers, and ICL games were soon withdrawn."

He continues, "The Sinclair computers were embraced by a generation of kids, like me, who were utterly captivated. In those days the television was the main source of entertainment and culture. Up to that point the information only flowed out of the television screen – it's hard to explain how exciting it was to take control of a television and display our creations. We quickly got bored of BASIC and started programming. Because it was hard, we were challenged. Extraordinarily talented programmers emerged with world class skills and creativity."

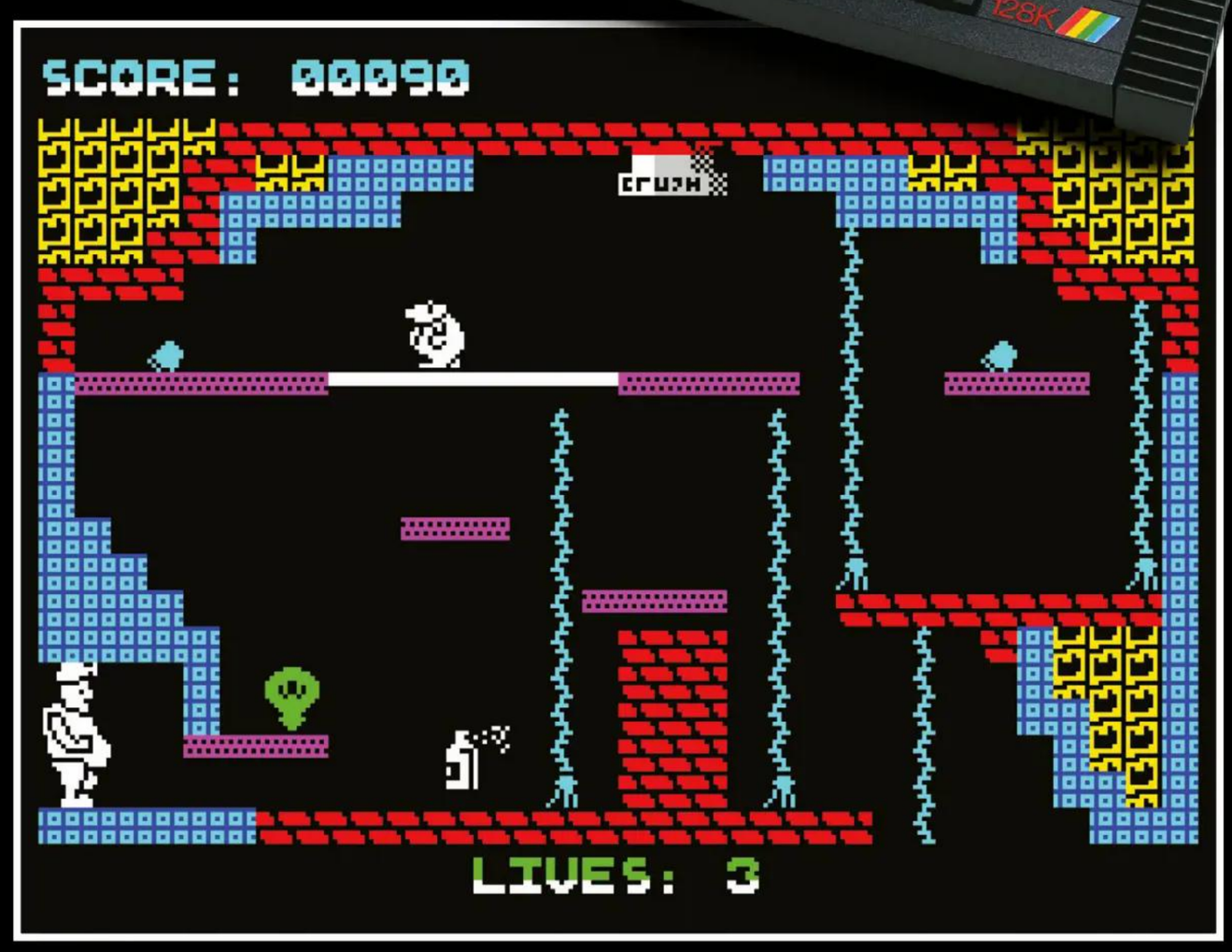
As to why the Spectrum is still so well remembered these days, Charles believes that it's much more than wistful nostalgia. "In 1982, seismic cultural changes were happening. Society was changing enormously too, driven by Margaret Thatcher and her ideologies. This created a huge cultural gap between the emerging Generation X generation and their Baby Boomer parents. We felt utterly unconstrained. The Spectrum was a huge part of this change, and to those who lived through it, the memories of that time are precious. This may explain why the Spectrum remained popular well into the late-Eighties, despite being graphically and technically way behind later computers like the Commodore Amiga and Atari ST."

The 16-bit machines Charles mentions provided an upgrade path for many Spectrum owners. Just seeing stunning games like *Defender Of The Crown* and *Shadow Of The Beast* was often enough to consign the old Spectrum to the loft space. But could things have been different, had Sinclair built on the legacy of the Spectrum? There were always whispered rumours of a 'Super Spectrum' being cooked up inside Sinclair's Cambridge labs, a computer that would disrupt the home micro market just as the Spectrum had done years earlier. Unfortunately, Sinclair's main focus was business and education users, which led to the ill-fated launch of the Sinclair QL in 1984. The commercial failure of the QL did have one upside – it forced Sinclair to refocus on what *had* worked, and that was the Spectrum. Cue the quick introduction of the Spectrum+, which added a QL-style case and keyboard. The hardware inside was the same. ▶



» [ZX Spectrum] The magnificent *Head Over Heels took* the isometric adventure to giddy new heights.

» [ZX Spectrum] *Out Run* and many other humongous coin-ops were converted to the Speccy. The results were often… mixed.



» [ZX Spectrum] The game that introduced the world to Monty Mole – and its developer Gremlin Graphics.

ZX LEGENDS

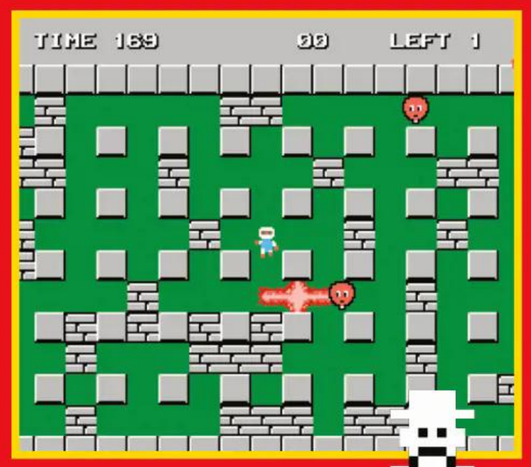
GAMING HEROES THAT WERE BORN ON THE SPECCY

MONTY MOLE

■ Peter Harrap's Spectrum version of *Wanted! Monty Mole* set the stage for the classics *Monty On The Run* and *Auf Wiedersehen Monty*. Later sequel *Impossamole* even ended up on the PC Engine (pictured). New, official entries will appear on the Spectrum and Next this year.

SABREMAN

■ Forget Jetman, it's Ultimate's Sabreman who has persisted. After appearing in four Spectrum games, he popped up in *Banjo-Tooie* and then starred in his own 2004 GBA game, *Sabre Wulf* (pictured). His nemesis, the Wulf, also inspired a fighter in the *Killer Instinct* series.



BOMBERMAN

■ Hudson Soft's hero made his *Western* debut on the Spectrum, under the alias Eric, in *Eric And The Floaters*, which was published on Sinclair's own software label in 1984. A port to the NES the following year (pictured) would see the character, er, explode in popularity.

HEAD AND HEELS

■ The two detachable doggies, the stars of Ocean's *Head Over Heels*, live on through the various remakes of Jon Ritman's masterpiece, including the recent update for the Next (pictured). There's also Colin Porch's long-gestating sequel in development for the ST and Amiga.

THE SPECTRUM REBORN

DEVICES THAT EMULATE THE SPECTRUM AND ITS GAMES

SAM COUPÉ

■ The SAM Coupé was marketed on release by Miles Gordon Technology as an upgrade path for existing Spectrum users, as it offered a (limited) Spectrum compatibility mode. However, it failed to make a dent in the micro market when it launched in 1989.

ZX TOUCH

■ Released in 2023, and banishing memories of the Vega+ debacle, this smart handheld is great for playing Spectrum games on the go. It features a 7-inch touch-screen and SD card support for loading up your own games, in addition to the homebrew titles it comes with.

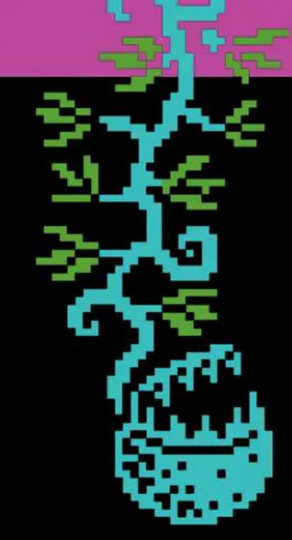
THE SPECTRUM

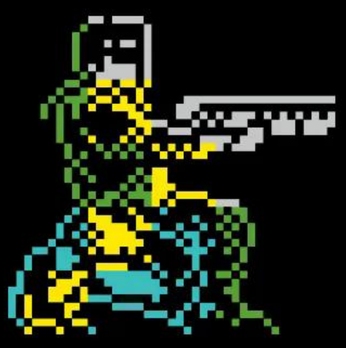
■ It was only a matter of time until Retro Games Ltd tackled the Spectrum and it did a fine job, delivering a recreation of the rubber-keyed model that feels 'right'. For casual nostalgics it comes with 48 built-in games, including some of the best Spectrum games ever released.

SPECTRUM NEXT

■ Designed as the computer Sinclair might have made had it continued the Spectrum line, the wonderful Next features new video modes, hardware sprites and other enhancements. Aside from dedicated Next software you can run bog-standard Speccy games on it, of course.

» Launched in 1995, the World Of Spectrum website brought fans together in the early days on the internet.





The Spectrum+ was a stop-gap release, pending the arrival of a genuine upgrade, the Spectrum 128. Outwardly, the 128 resembled the Spectrum+, but the hardware inside was updated, with the addition of 128KB of memory and a three-channel AY sound chip to replace the Spectrum's funny little 'beeper'. Sinclair went against type and marketed the 128 as a games machine – yet despite the extra memory and proper sound, it didn't offer any additional display modes to improve its game-playing capabilities (colour clash was part of the machine's 'Spectrumocity', it seems, and was here to stay). The 128 didn't even include a built-in joystick port. The irony here is the Timex 2068 computer – a Spectrum upgrade developed primarily for the US market in 1983 – already used a display chip that offered enhanced video modes in addition to the standard Spectrum display. Could that not have been incorporated into the 128?

Sinclair programmer Rupert Goodwins worked on the 128's system software and he believes this is wishful thinking. "The focus was on making better and cheaper hardware that made it easier and nicer to use existing software," he says. "I don't think we expected that the games industry, which was moving on from 8-bit in general, would want to spend much time writing for modes that would never be available to more than a small subset of Spectrum owners. Plus, extra modes with higher resolution aren't much good, especially for games, if they're still being driven by

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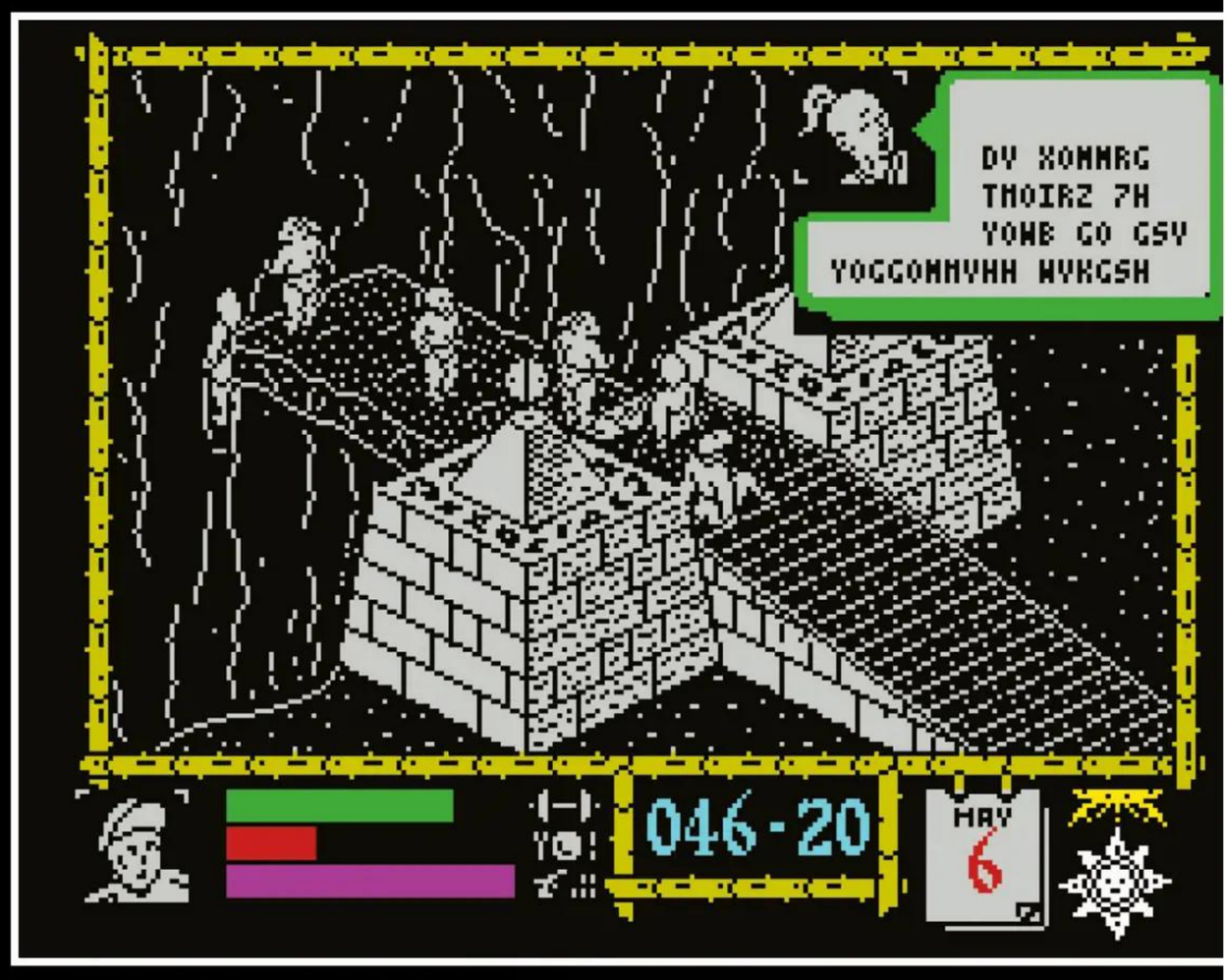
» *Your Sinclair*'s irreverent and entertaining coverage would be adopted by several future videogames magazines.



» [ZX Spectrum] Too few games were developed specifically for the 128KB Spectrum. *Where Time Stood Still* from Denton Designs is the standout release.

» [ZX Spectrum] Many homebrew titles have plugged gaps in the Spectrum's library, like *The Perils Of Willy* (2020), which was previously only available on the VIC-20

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» EMAP's *Sinclair User* was the longest-running Speccy mag, published continuously between 1982 and 1993.

CRASH
MICRO GAMES ACTION
FEBRUARY 1984 75p.
No.1
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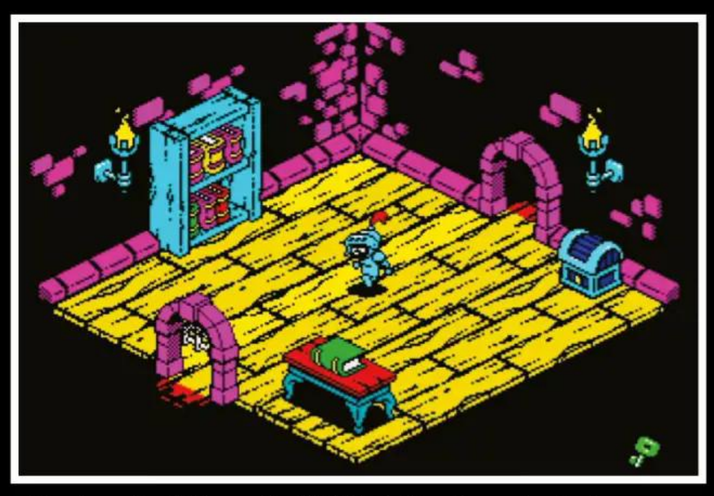
» The first issue of Newsfield's much-loved *Crash* magazine went on sale in January 1984.



» [Spectrum Next] Games like *Melkhior's Mansion* on the Next keep the spirit of the original ZX Spectrum alive.

a 3.5MHz Z80 with no hardware support – and once you start adding that, you're designing a new computer. Who wanted a new 8-bit computer in the latter half of the Eighties?"

We also now know that Sinclair wasn't in a financial position to innovate. The 128 was funded by Spanish distributor Investronica, and shortly after the machine's UK launch in early 1986, it was announced that the Sinclair computer business had been acquired by rival Amstrad. Would the new owners meaningfully upgrade the Spectrum? In short: no. The Spectrum +2 looked very much like Amstrad's 464 computer, with a built-in tape recorder being the obvious addition. Under the new, grey, slab-like exterior, the hardware was essentially the same as the 128's. It was released in late-1986, with the +3 disk drive model arriving the following year. "The +2 was a very quick exercise in getting costs down, freshening the brand and making it look new," says Rupert, who was the only Sinclair employee to move over to Amstrad following the sale. "Compatibility was very important, so making as few functional changes as possible kept the development costs and time to market down with minimal risk. The +3 was pretty much in mind all the time. Amstrad knew it had a commercial advantage with the 3-inch floppy drives, but as it would take longer to develop and test, the +2 had a role to play in keeping the Spectrum brand alive."

> "SINCLAIR HAD AN UNDERLYING CYNICISM ABOUT ITS CUSTOMERS – 'A GAMES MACHINE? THAT'S A BIT BENEATH OUR DIGNITY'"
> **RUPERT GOODWINS**

The Spectrum was positioned as Amstrad's low-end computer, and served to broaden its range that already included the CPC, PCW and PC lines. For Rupert, this was a simple business decision. "Amstrad did the sums and worked out how much profit it could get from the Spectrum when its supply and distribution magic was plugged in. I'm more inclined to blame Sinclair for arranging the Spectrum's drawn-out drift into obscurity. Sinclair had an underlying cynicism about its customers – 'A games machine? That's a bit beneath our dignity' – while Amstrad knew what people wanted and gave it to them. It's nice to fantasise about a world where the Spectrum evolved into something even more successful and long-running. But in the end, there's only so much you can do with architecture originally designed in 1981."

» Retro Games Ltd has launched a limited white edition of The Spectrum, complete with accompanying printer and Quickshot II-style joystick.

Amstrad would continue to manufacture the Spectrum until April 1992, meaning the production lines ran for precisely a decade. The final few commercial games appeared in 1993 and the last surviving Spectrum magazines *Sinclair User* and *Your Sinclair* closed the same year. The rest of the Nineties were largely fallow years, although there were still pockets of commercial support outside the UK, notably in Central European countries.

Of course, the legacy of the Spectrum would live on in hobbyist circles, largely driven by two developments in the mid-Nineties: the arrival of the first Spectrum emulators and the launch of the World Of Spectrum (WOS) website. Fans could now run Spectrum software on the PC and other computers, and the website provided a vast online archive of games and information. The WOS forum and comp.sys.sinclair newsgroup became home to a growing number of nostalgic 'Spec-chums' and the Spectrum community was born. Since the early Noughties, the homebrew scene has really taken flight and there are dozens of quality titles released every year. The number of releases has been amplified by DIY game creation tools like AGD (Arcade Game Designer) from Jonathan Cauldwell and La Churrera from the Mojon Twins.

"These tools are incredibly important," says Jarrod Bentley, who has been involved in both commercial Spectrum games (*Crystal Kingdom Dizzy*, *Turbo The Tortoise*) and numerous homebrew titles. "They are the homebrewer's homebrew kit, a way to get your vision out there. Trying to write your first game in assembly can be daunting. It's not for everyone. La Churrera and especially AGD take a lot of the stress away. And as you gain more confidence, you can add your own code which could lead to writing a game from the ground up. Just look at some of the sterling work programmers like Allan Turvey have done since they first started using AGD. I think the Spectrum scene is still healthy, which you can clearly see at the Crash Live community event each year. We have new Spectrum hardware to play on, new games to play with, and new software houses, like Anthony Scarfe's Northern Games producing physical copies to collect. It's great to see more people taking up the challenge, not just in coding. There are some really talented artists coming through, and also 1-bit music wizards like Rich Hollins."

> "WE HAVE NEW SPECTRUM HARDWARE TO PLAY ON, NEW GAMES TO PLAY WITH, AND NEW SOFTWARE HOUSES"
> **JARROD BENTLEY**

In mentioning new hardware, Jarrod is referring to the many modern devices you can now use to run Spectrum games, such as the ZX Touch handheld, and The Spectrum from Retro Games Ltd. There are also simple, cost-effective boards available like the ZX Pico and ESPectrum. Of course, the headline piece of hardware is the Spectrum Next, which first launched as a cased model in 2020 following a successful Kickstarter campaign. For Sinclair owners who longed for a 'Super Spectrum' back in the day, the Next effectively delivers that mythical machine – it supports original software and hardware while also bringing vastly enhanced audio and video capabilities to the table (plus the ability to run other retro systems). And, as a nod to that very special Spectrum that was produced in 1983 to recognise sales smashing the one million mark, the Next and The Spectrum are both available in limited-edition white cases.

Now, 44 years after it launched, it's clear that the legacy of the Spectrum lives on – in software, hardware, the videogames industry, and the retro community. "When I look into the Spectrum's future," says Jarrod, "I definitely need to wear shades." ✱

» Honey, I shrunk my Spectrum. Released in 2015, the ZX Spectrum Vega was a compact plug-and-play device that fit in the palm of your hand. It came pre-loaded with 1,000 games.

GARETH NOYCE Q&A

THE CREATOR OF THE LUMO GAMES ON REVIVING THE ISOMETRIC ADVENTURE

» *Lumo* series creator Gareth Noyce is the founder of Triple Eh? studio.

Is there a title in particular that inspired *Lumo*?
Yes, Jon Ritman's *Head Over Heels*. I used to play it with a friend, taking turns. I remember making new rooms for it. That's probably when I started getting interested in game development. All of Jon's work was influential – *Batman* and especially *Monster Max* – but I've got the fondest memories of messing around in *Head Over Heels*. Bernie Drummond's art was incredible, and it felt like a real step-up, both in visual terms, and in the unique dynamics that the two characters brought to the game.

» [Switch] *Lumo* is a charming love letter to the isometric adventures of the Eighties.

In your experience, how difficult was it to develop isometric games on a Z80 computer?
It was borderline witchcraft. I never wrote an isometric engine in Z80, but the core difficulty is probably the depth sorting – working out what's in front of what. In true 3D it's fairly easy, but in 2D you have to manually decide the draw order for every single object. Jon Ritman has talked about this – he said it took him ages just to figure out how Ultimate did the sprite masking in *Knight Lore*, and even longer to crack the sorting problem. The maths isn't actually that complex, but implementing it efficiently, on a Z80, is another matter entirely.

How rewarding have you found the whole experience of developing the *Lumo* games?
The first *Lumo* was a bit tricky. I never really planned to work on it for two years. It started off as a hobby project that suddenly grew arms and legs. Everything about it was tongue in cheek, riffing on the old Eighties games and magazines. I'd get up every morning and just make whatever popped into my head. You don't get many opportunities in life to do something that niche, so I'm very thankful that people ended up liking it. I jumped on the chance to make the sequel, as it let me really lean into the elements of the first game that I had the most fun with. I was in the position where I wasn't overly worried about making something mainstream. I could make something laser-focussed on *Your Sinclair* and *Zzap!64* readers, hitting their 50s, and not worry too much about anyone that didn't get the joke.

Have any of your programming heroes reached out to comment?
I've been in the industry for nearly 25 years, and I've been fortunate to have worked with a lot of my Speccy dev heroes. The Pickford brothers were the first to give me a push to make *Lumo* – and *Zub* is always hiding somewhere in my games. Jeff Minter's a very close friend, who half the running jokes in the sequel are about. But one thing did stick out. A friend working at Rare sent me a message, on the morning of *Lumo*'s release, saying a bunch of people in the studio were playing it. So in a weird way, it went full circle, making it back, 30 years later, to where it all started.

» The lovely *Lumo* artwork was illustrated by friend of **RG**, Wil Overton.

THE RETRO GAMER GUIDE TO

elite

SYSTEMS

WITH OVER FOUR DECADES IN THE INDUSTRY ELITE HAS MADE AN IMPRESSIVE NUMBER OF GAMES. HERE'S THE HITS AND MISSES THAT SHAPED THE CLASSIC PUBLISHER

WORDS BY DARRAN JONES

It seemed like everyone wanted to get into videogames during the early Eighties, and Richard Wilcox was no different. After publishing *Blue Thunder* under the less-than-snappy moniker of Richard Wilcox Software he rebranded the company, teamed up with his brother Steve (who handled sales and marketing) and gave his company a far cooler name – Elite Systems.

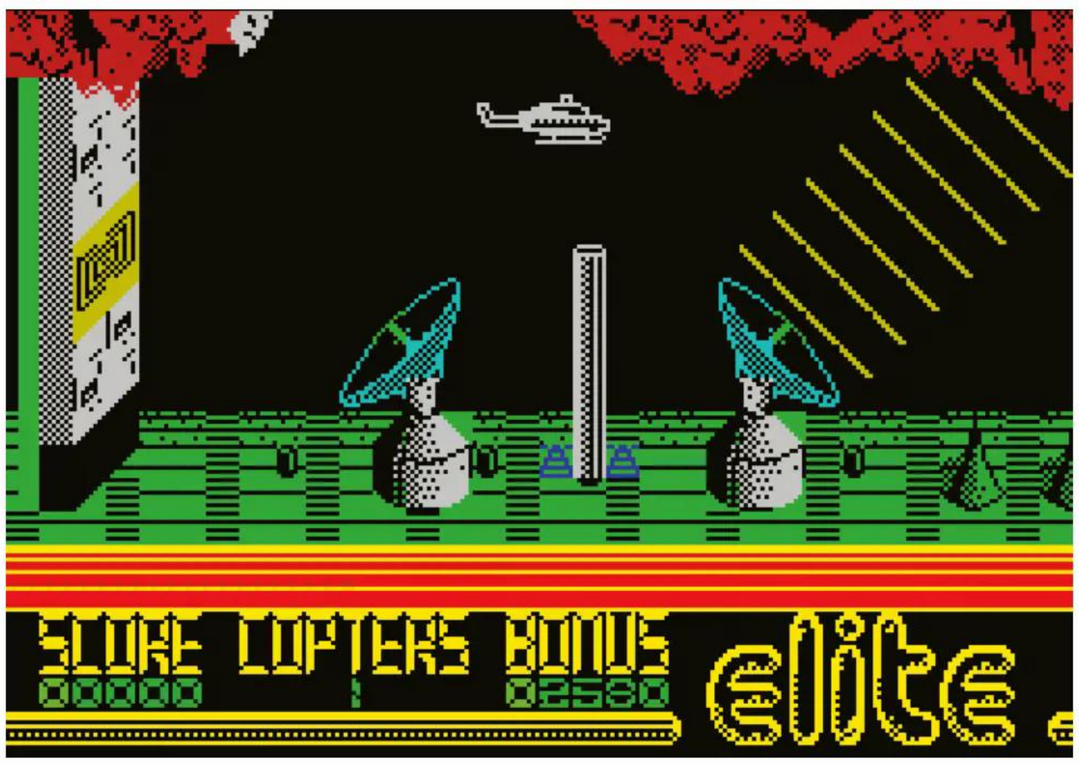
While it initially focussed on original titles like *Kokotoni Wilf* and *Roller Coaster*, the brothers soon realised the power of arcade, movie and TV licences and changed their strategy accordingly.

The end result was that Elite did extremely well throughout the Eighties and Nineties, only coming undone slightly – as many companies from the time did – with the introduction of 3D gaming and the shift from home computers to consoles. In fact it still exists today, largely operating in the mobile market – although it did work on a bluetooth version of the ZX Spectrum – which is a rather impressive achievement when you consider how fickle the games industry currently is. Here we're focusing on the titles that defined the company in its earlier days. How many of the following did you get to play? ✱

KOKOTONI WILF 1984

■ Elite's debut game may share an obvious similarity to Matthew Smith's *Jet Set Willy*, but there's still much about it that makes it stand apart from its illustrious peer. The biggest difference is Wilf's ability to fly, which greatly changes how you approach each screen. There are still plenty of tight platforms to navigate and squeeze past, but it gives you an even greater sense of freedom than Smith's game as you're not simply limited to where you can walk.

Kokotoni Wilf's story (what there is) is arguably stronger too, with Wilf having to collect the scattered pieces of an amulet so he can gain access to the six time zones that make up the game's levels. Said stages are the final treat to Elite's game as they ensure that there are plenty of different areas to navigate compared to Miner Willy's (admittedly huge) mansion.



AIRWOLF 1984

■ There's a lot to like about Elite's adaptation of the popular TV show. The concept is sound, with Stringfellow Hawke (classically Eighties name) navigating his eponymous attack chopper through a deep underground base in search of five missing scientists. The chopper is challenging, but not impossible, to master and the level design is solid, requiring you to shoot out switches so you can travel deeper into the complex. It's a pity then that the infamous regenerating walls that you need to shoot down to progress are just as frustrating to take out now as they were in 1984.

COMMANDO 1985

■ Elite soon realised the value of converting arcade games, and it made a particularly solid impression with its conversion of Capcom's *Commando*. Virtually all its home conversions of the classic run-and-gun were well received, with the Spectrum offering being a particular highlight (and coded by Nigel Alderton, the creator of *Chuckie Egg*). Interestingly, Elite's later release *Duet* was also known by the name *Commando 85* and *Commando 86*, depending on which version you owned.

FRANK BRUNO'S BOXING 1985

■ This entertaining fighting game is a shameless clone of Nintendo's 1984 arcade game, *Super Punch Out!!*, going so far as to feature three identical-looking fighters. *Frank Bruno's Boxing* was released around the same time as *Rocco* by Gremlin Graphics, but while Gremlin's game has superior visuals, Elite's offering packs a punch where it counts – in the fighting mechanics department. It's highly satisfying to systematically take down each opponent, while the difficulty factor is challenging but never overwhelming.

1942 1986

■ After the success of *Commando*, Elite worked on another Capcom arcade release, this time based on the company's popular vertical shmup. It's another fine effort which isn't anywhere near as fast as the arcade original, but does feature all the key elements, including the victory roll to escape danger, the waves of planes that drop power-ups and the landing ships. The Amstrad and Spectrum versions are particularly good as they keep the scoring on the right side of the screen to preserve the original game's aspect ratio. ▶

ROLLER COASTER 1986

■ This excellent platformer was another great original effort from Elite and proved the publisher had a good eye for interesting games. Set in a gigantic theme park, the idea is to collect the large number of moneybags that are scattered around the deviously designed screens, using the numerous rides and many roller-coasters as you go. It would be repurposed by Elite many years later for the Game Boy, as you'll discover further on.

PAPERBOY 1986

■ 1986 was a fantastic year for Elite with a string of solid arcade conversions. One of its most popular was for *Paperboy*, Atari's excellent delivery-'em-up that was often featured on the TV show *First Class*. The Elite conversion is very good, particularly on the Amstrad where the chunky bright visuals effortlessly match the cheerful look of the arcade original. Sadly, out of the numerous 8-bit micro versions that Elite produced, only the C64 offering features in-game music.

1986 WAS A FANTASTIC YEAR FOR ELITE WITH A STRING OF SOLID ARCADE CONVERSIONS

GHOSTS 'N GOBLINS 1986

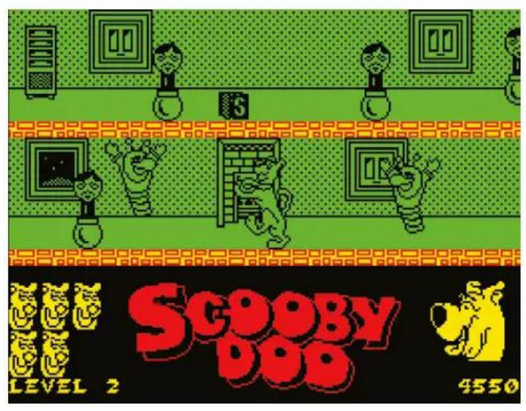
■ Capcom's ghoulish platformer proved to be a good choice for Elite, with its developers doing a good job of capturing the difficulty and atmosphere of the arcade original. The Amstrad version is probably the weakest (although it has a lovely loading screen from Ste Pickford) while the C64 version (with more loading art from Ste) is easily the best and has a stunningly funky soundtrack by Mark Cooksey.

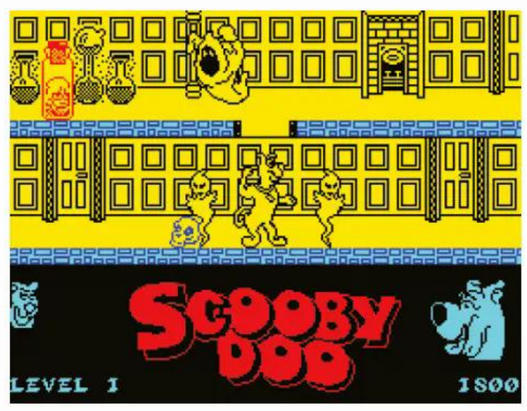
SPACE HARRIER 1986

■ Elite's coders were never going to match the sheer speed and intense action of Yu Suzuki's original arcade blaster, but they certainly tried. While the 16-bit offerings are actually surprisingly faithful ports, the 8-bit offerings are less impressive, featuring dull visuals that fail to capture the excitement of Sega's arcade hit.

BOMB JACK 1986

■ Ask any Spectrum owner what Elite's best arcade conversion was and they'll most likely say this one. It's a truly fantastic adaptation of Tehkan's coin-op, which requires you to fly around the screen and ideally defuse bombs in a specific order. The Amstrad version is also decent, but the ST and Amiga ones are very disappointing, particularly as they came out a good five years after the arcade original.





SCOOBY-DOO 1986

■ When Elite first revealed *Scooby-Doo* in magazines it promised to be an epic-looking game with stunning *Dragon's Lair*-styled visuals. The game was simply too ambitious, however, and the humble Spectrum didn't have the memory required to store the huge number of animations that would be needed to power such a graphics-hungry game.

After the project fell apart Elite contracted Gargoyle Games, who delivered a fun, but rather conventional platformer that saw Scooby running around a haunted castle in search of his missing friends. It still looks great, with lovely visuals and expressive animation, but we'll always wonder about what could have been.

WHEN ELITE FIRST REVEALED SCOOBY-DOO IN MAGAZINES IT PROMISED TO BE AN EPIC-LOOKING GAME WITH STUNNING VISUALS

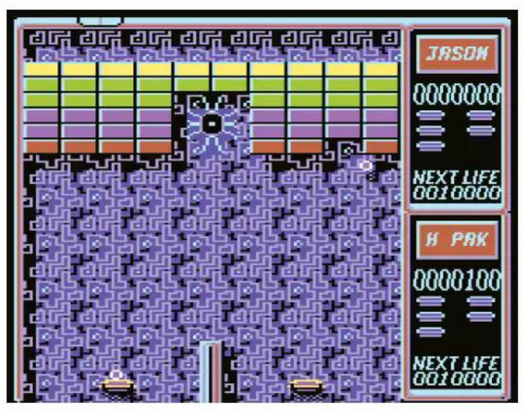
BATTLESHIPS 1987

■ A computer port of the classic board game sounds dreadfully boring, but Elite did a surprisingly decent job at making it far from dull to play. The main excitement comes from watching a great sequence of your ship firing off shots and exploding others whenever you score a direct hit.

THUNDERCATS 1987

Critically acclaimed upon release, *ThunderCats* proves to be a surprisingly average run-and-gun in the vein of *Ghosts 'N Goblins* and other similar arcade games. Lion-O must fend off attacks from an endless supply of enemies, many of which don't actually appear in the TV show. There are also opportunities for the ThunderCats leader to hop into a flying vehicle and shoot down foes or grab a handy gun, which suddenly makes the onslaught a lot more manageable. By far the most interesting aspect of the game is that it's simply a retooled version of *Samurai Dawn*, as revealed by YouTube veteran Larry Bundy Jr in 2014.

BATTY 1987



Amazingly, one of the Spectrum's best games (at least from our point of view) was actually given away for free as a covertape by *Your Sinclair*.

At its core Batty is really nothing more than an *Arkanoid* clone, which itself is just a jazzed up version of *Breakout*. It's a far superior game that greatly improves on the similar titles available at the time thanks to cleverly designed stages, a great range of power-ups and – most importantly – a co-operative two-player mode that features two players controlling half of the screen each in an attempt to clear the various wall configurations.

LIVE AND LET DIE 1988

Released 15 years after the debut of the original film, *Live And Let Die* is a technically impressive game that has you careering around the world's waterways in a tooled-up speedboat. It looks nice, but is let down by its dull level design and weak enemy AI. US readers will recognise it as *Aquablast*.

IKARI WARRIORS 1988

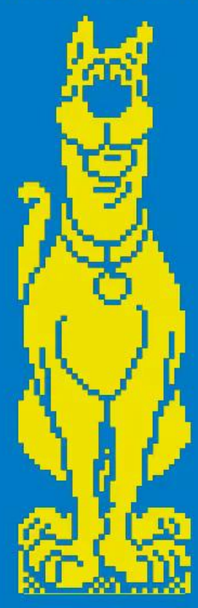
Elite did another fine job converting SNK's frantic run-and-gun, and even managed to get around the rotary control system the original arcade game used. Surprisingly, the 8-bit versions are more fun to play than the later 16-bit offerings, although they obviously take a graphical hit. There are two versions of the game on the C64, with the US release by Data East USA being absolutely dreadful.

OVERLANDER 1988

The cover of *Overlander* suggests an exciting apocalyptic racing game in the style of *Mad Max 2* or *Roadblasters*. Sadly it's a fairly conventional offering with solid enough visuals but very little in the way of excitement. The C64 version is at least saved by a rather pleasing soundtrack by Mark Cooksey, while the Amstrad version is a weak Spectrum port.

MUCH SCOOBY-DOO ABOUT NOTHING

RICHARD WILCOX ON THE MISSING SCOOBY-DOO GAME



How did *Scooby-Doo* come about?

God, I loved the *Scooby* cartoons. I still do; they're probably my favourite of all time. Not quite sure who had the idea of licensing *Scooby*. It's highly likely that I would have suggested it, but Steve would have done the deal. He was very good at tracking down who owned the rights and getting the licences, even though the TV and film companies weren't attuned to merchandising and rights exploitation like they are today.

Tell us about the original idea for the game.

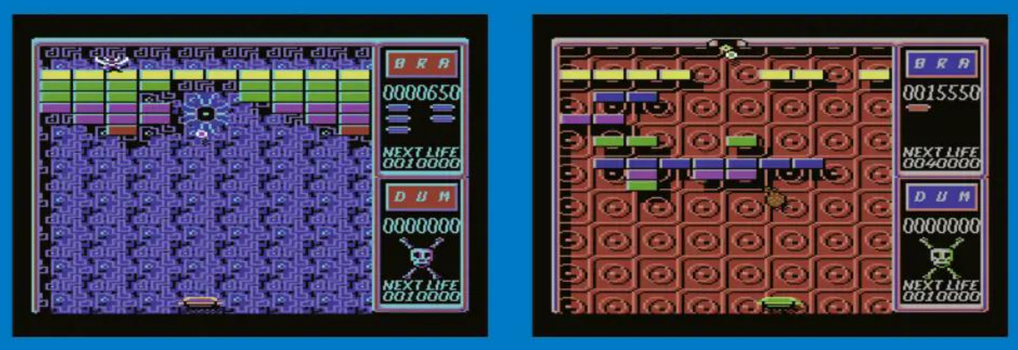
When it came to what the *Scooby* game would be the design really fell to me. I was never a great programmer and only a very mediocre designer of graphics, but I wasn't a bad games designer. I was methodical and structured even back in those days when the idea of creating a game design document before starting coding was alien. The ambitions for *Scooby* were enormous. Even though it would sell because of the licence, I wanted it to be a great game in its own right. The prototype was Don Bluth's *Dragon's Lair*, something that looked as good as any cartoon but was interactive. To me, it seemed that if we could at least distil some of the elements of that then we might have a chance of telling a real *Scooby* story and make something that felt at least a little bit like an episode of the show.

Why didn't it happen?

The big difference between that game and ours would be the hardware. Theirs was pulling the animation off LaserDisc. We just had 48K of RAM in which to cram all of our animations. In our defence, we gave it a pretty good shot. I came up with what these days you might call a 'game engine' that allowed us to define and run interactive scenes. It was pretty darn powerful and allowed you to create minigames that were extremely varied. The really clever thing was that you didn't need to code each minigame separately; we had developed a scene designer tool that allowed you to do the layout and define the interactivity. This tool then encoded the levels in such a way that they could be played back in real time. Andy Williams did the coding. He was Elite's number-one programmer and, of course, he nailed it. But what killed us was the graphics. I hadn't accounted for just how much animation we would need and how long it would take and ultimately how much memory it would need… memory that, of course, the Spectrum didn't have.

Do you think it ever could have been made?

It was ahead of its time. A few years down the line when art teams were much bigger and machines had more memory we would have got there. I still don't think there's been a game that has combined the best elements of cartoons and games.



GOING BATTY

JASON BENHAM ON HIS POPULAR ARKANOID CLONE

What can you tell us about the story behind *Batty*, Jason?
The history is that I independently made an *Arkanoid* clone for the Commodore 64. Living in a small seaside town – Redcar – I had access to all the latest games in the arcades, and I could get right through to the end of *Arkanoid* with maybe a couple of continues. I wanted to make a game that could do everything *Arkanoid* could do and more, hence the enemies firing shots that stun you, the extra power-ups, the bricks you can only destroy from the top, metal walls and so on. From what I remember, *Batty* took around three or four months to create while working at home.

How did you go about getting the game published?
I originally submitted the game to Superior Software in Leeds, who had published my previous C64 game *The Legend Of Sinbad*, but the guys there felt it was too close to the upcoming licensed versions of *Arkanoid* for comfort and passed on it. I then discovered that Elite Systems was looking to put out an *Arkanoid* clone on multiple platforms. Elite scooped it up and I was paid a lump sum, maybe £4,000 or so, from what I remember. Despite making games on the VIC-20 and C64 since 1982, it was the first game where I actually got paid a decent amount!

Did Elite ask you to make any design changes to the game?
Elite requested a few small changes. I was asked to improve the graphics for the bat and change the intro music a little as I had completely copied it from *Arkanoid*! The magnetic field that would deflect the ball was also requested later on. Aside from that, everything else was in my original submission. The extra power-ups, aliens firing and multiplayer mode were ported to the other platforms based on the C64 version.

Did you have anything to do with the Spectrum and Amstrad versions of *Batty*?
I never dealt directly with the guys making versions for other platforms, so there wasn't really any parallel development except when adding features at the end. The magnet-in-the-playfield idea was taken from either the Amstrad or Speccy version. It's the main feature over which I had little design input.

Were you happy with how the game turned out?
The feature I'm most proud of is the two-player mode. I know other games from that era did something similar – *TRAZ* maybe – but it added a lot to the frenetic gameplay. I was upset that it was never released as a standalone product. I think it only came out on the *Hit-Pak* collection.

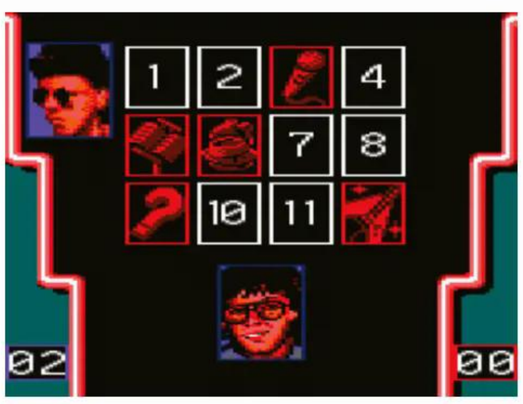
It was released on Elite's budget label as well. How do you think *Batty* held up when compared to the many home versions of *Arkanoid*?
I was very pleased with the game, especially compared to the original *Arkanoid*. The sequel, *Revenge Of Doh*, had a few cool power-ups that mine didn't have, but the two-player mode in *Batty* really made the difference. If you got two players together who liked the game, you could just play for hours and lose track of time.

BEYOND THE ICE PALACE 1988

Beyond The Ice Palace started life as one of Elite's *ThunderCats* games, but the company eventually changed its mind and Nick Jones (who revealed the information to website Games That Weren't C64) continued to code his adventure. The end result is a fun hack-and-slash with enjoyable platforming that should please fans of *Ghosts 'N Goblins*.

BUGGY BOY 1988

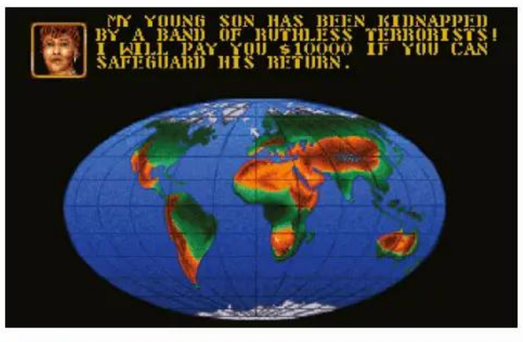
While none of the home systems could replicate the three-screen setup of the arcade original, the Amiga version featured here and the earlier 8-bit offerings (which arrived a year earlier) are all worth investigating. Handling is tight and responsive, the tracks offer plenty of challenge and it does a great job of capturing the bright aesthetics of Tatsumi's 1985 original.



MIKE READ'S POP QUIZ 1989

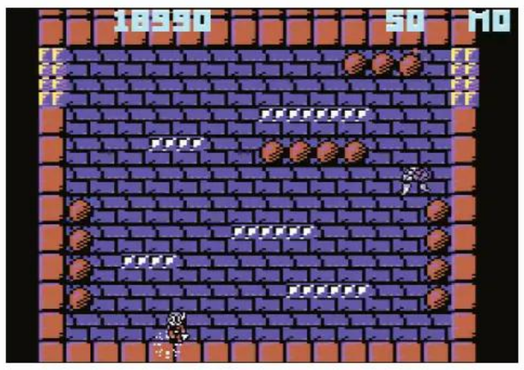
Elite was never one to miss a good licence deal, and securing Mike Read's popular TV quiz was a clever call. The final game is a surprisingly authentic experience with a large range of questions. The digitised images obviously look best on the Amiga, but all the home systems are pretty good. If you're not a child of the Eighties you might want to give it a miss, mind.

ELITE WAS NEVER ONE TO MISS A GOOD LICENCE DEAL, AND SECURING MIKE READ'S POPULAR TV QUIZ WAS A CLEVER CALL



DOGS OF WAR 1989

Essentially an enhanced version of *Commando*, *Dogs Of War* mixes things up by giving you a variety of missions to achieve and adds in far more varied locations for you to explore. While it's rather low on variety, the sheer amount of carnage on-screen does keep things entertaining, while the range of changing missions ensures there's a little more strategy than simply running up the screen shooting things. It's a game that's certainly worth investigating.



MIGHTY BOMB JACK 1990

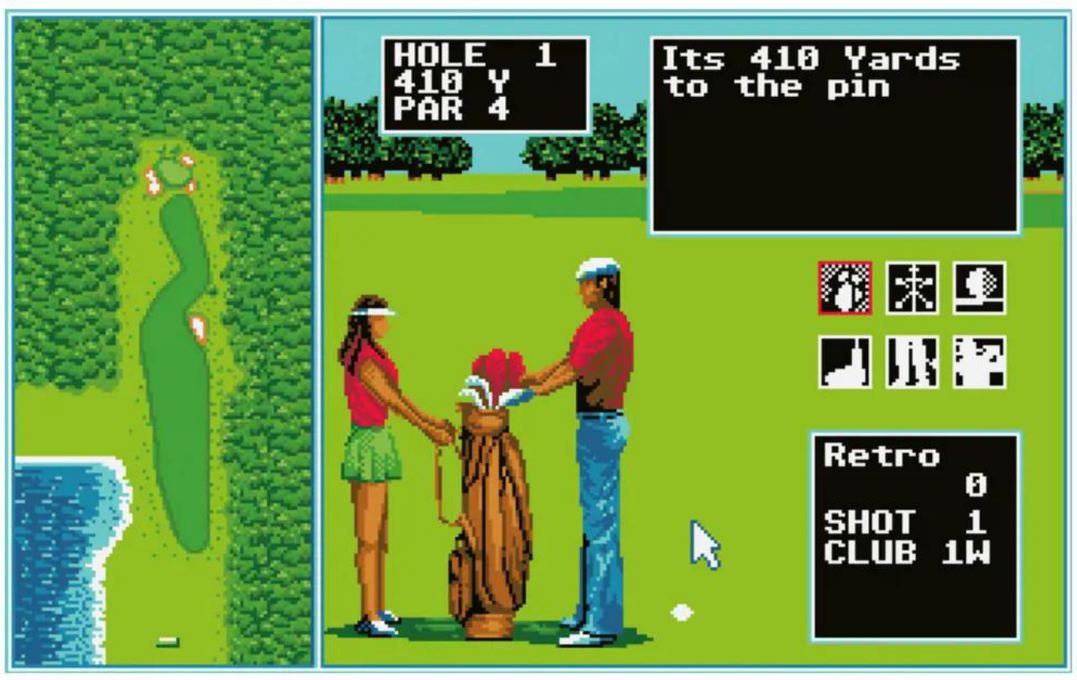
■ Elite's third *Bomb Jack* game (it also created a home computer sequel in 1986) is actually a port of *Bomb Jack*'s sequel, which was originally released for the NES in 1986. It's an interesting take on the earlier bomb collecting of the original, with additional focus on coins, which give Jack several abilities when collected. It lacks the accessibility and tightness of the original, but is still fun to play.

GREMLINS 2: THE NEW BATCH 1990

■ One of the last movie licences Elite was involved with was this disappointing Motivetime effort. It looks nice enough with some smart-looking environments and nicely animated gremlins, but the game itself is extremely tedious to play and far too difficult. It was well received on the Amiga, but we fail to see how.

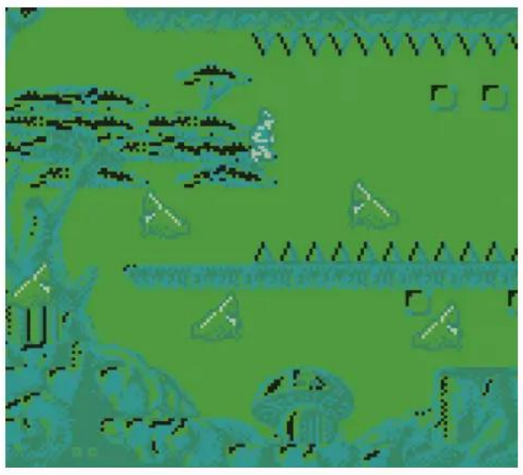
WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP SOCCER 1990

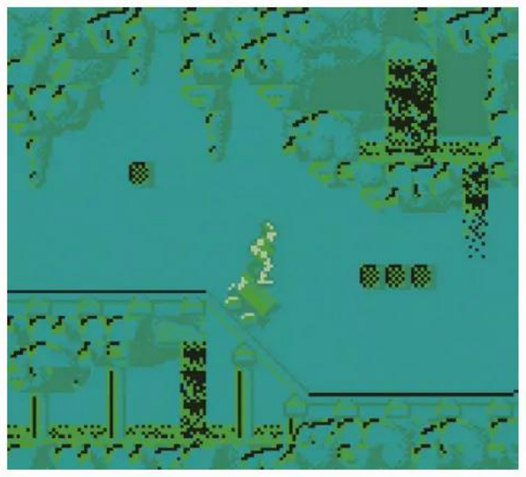
■ Elite ported Sega's popular Mega Drive football game to home systems the year after its release, but it probably wasn't really worth the effort. While it features a similar top-down view to games like *Microprose Soccer* and *Sensible Soccer*, it's nowhere near as much fun to play and the computer AI isn't particularly challenging. Not terrible, but there are certainly better options out there.



TOURNAMENT GOLF 1990

■ This is basically another Sega conversion, this time of *Arnold Palmer Tournament Golf*. It's a perfectly serviceable adaptation of the popular sports game with some challenging courses and plenty of game modes to master. While Palmer's name is nowhere to be seen in the actual game, a loading screen still survives of him, but now he has brown hair.





DRAGON'S LAIR: THE LEGEND 1991

■ Realising that it would never be able to recreate Don Bluth's stunning animation for its Game Boy licence, Elite looked instead to its back catalogue and found the perfect solution – *Roller Coaster*. The classic Spectrum game was simply retooled with brand-new Gothic backgrounds and enemies to suit the new game, and the player now controlled Dirk Daring. It works extremely well, and while the playing area is a lot smaller than before it doesn't harm how it plays.

DR FRANKEN 1992

■ After a few conversions of Sega games, Elite committed to Nintendo for the 16-bit period and this was one of the company's more interesting efforts. Originally released on the Game Boy with a SNES version following a year later, it's a fun platformer where you have to search for the missing body parts of your girlfriend. A sequel followed in 1997.

JOE & MAC: CAVEMAN NINJA 1993

■ Elite's port of the classic Data East platformer is a little disappointing if we're honest. While it retains the two-player mode of the arcade original, it's let down by missing animation and a low framerate. The dinos look nice and it's still fun to play, but the Amiga is capable of a lot more.

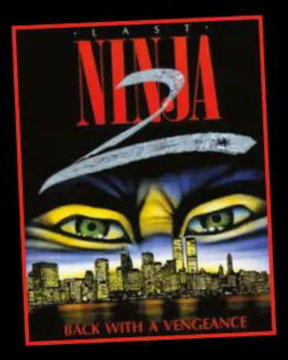
STRIKER 1993

■ Elite published the SNES version of Rage Software's football game, and it's still surprisingly good fun to play. It's very arcade-like in its approach, featuring a similar pace as *Sensible Soccer* and ridiculously good goalkeepers. There are plenty of different game modes to ensure interest doesn't flag, as well as an indoor soccer option, which was quite unusual for the time.

DIRT RACER 1995

■ One of the last games Elite created for the Super Nintendo was this ambitious off-road racing game that was powered by the machine's Super FX chip. It's similar in style to *Stunt Race FX*, but lacks that game's charm and well-designed courses. It was an exclusive to Europe as well.

THE MAKING OF • LAST • NINJA



IN THE KNOW

» **PUBLISHER:** SYSTEM 3

» **DEVELOPER:** SYSTEM 3

» **PLATFORM:** C64, VARIOUS

» **RELEASED:** 1988

» **GENRE:** ACTION ADVENTURE

» Mark Cale founded System 3 in 1982 and still runs the studio to this day.

BACK WITH A VENGEANCE

» [C64] Chicken laced with sedatives is the only way to get past the otherwise deadly puma in *Last Ninja 2*.

» [C64] Getting through *Last Ninja 2*'s dark room is made trickier by the fact that there's a maze in it!

PLANNED LONG BEFORE THE RELEASE OF THE ORIGINAL GAME, LAST NINJA 2'S MARTIAL ARTS ADVENTURING BROUGHT SYSTEM 3 WORLDWIDE SUCCESS. STUDIO FOUNDER MARK CALE EXPLAINS HOW THE HUGELY POPULAR C64 SEQUEL CAME TO BE

WORDS BY RORY MILNE

By today's standards, Eighties games had relatively short development times, and so follow-ups often appeared hot on the heels of successful titles. System 3's *Last Ninja 2* was something of an outlier in this respect, in so much as it was a foregone conclusion before the original game had even come out. This was in no small part due to the response to a playable preview of *The Last Ninja* and the demand shown for the game prior to its subsequent release, as System 3 founder Mark Cale remembers. "When we created *Last Ninja* we always thought we could continue the adventure, the whole idea of its ending was to leave it open to a sequel," Mark points out. "Our global distributor at the time was Activision, and its phone lines in London were constantly ringing before *Last Ninja* was released with people asking when it was coming out. So we already knew it was going to be a massive hit. A lot of that turned around when we did the covertape demo for *Zzap!64*. When people saw that and realised they weren't fake screenshots they knew it could

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

THE LAST NINJA (PICTURED)
PLATFORM: C64, VARIOUS
RELEASED: 1987

IK+
PLATFORM: C64, VARIOUS
RELEASED: 1987

MYTH: HISTORY IN THE MAKING
PLATFORM: C64, VARIOUS
RELEASED: 1989

COOL CHALLENGES

THE EPIC ENCOUNTERS OF THE EIGHTIES CLASSIC

COPS AND CRIMINALS

New York's finest are understandably upset to have a ninja on their streets, although arming themselves with shuriken seems like overkill! The big apple's bad guys are equally well armed, so expect them to put up a fight.

ALLIGATOR ATTACK

The final opponent in *Last Ninja 2*'s sewers is a fully grown alligator, presumably banished there when it got too big to be cute anymore. You need a Molotov cocktail to defeat it, and you have to assemble that from parts.

CHOPLIFTER

Originally intended to be set on the Statue Of Liberty, *Last Ninja 2*'s helicopter setpiece instead takes place on a New York rooftop. The chopper doesn't land; you leap off its rope ladder when you reach your destination!

SHOGUN SHOWDOWN

After you enter the shogun's lair you need to unlock a safe with a code to get a sacred bowl, light candles at the points of a pentagram, get the shogun into it and dispatch him with a shuriken. All while fighting him off.

» [C64] Access to *Last Ninja 2*s bandstand basement requires a button to be pressed in another location.

» [C64] You can build nunchucks in *Last Ninja 2* from wooden handled chains found in public toilets.

be incredible. So we knew there would be a sequel."

With *The Last Ninja* being set in a fantasy-inspired feudal Japan, it would have been reasonable for its follow-up to follow suit. Instead, System 3 located *Last Ninja 2* in contemporary New York. This plot twist was explained by time travel and inspired by Hollywood. "We always wanted the series to not just be based in Japan. A lot of that was influenced by *Highlander*," Mark acknowledges. "It was set in different times: you had Scotland back in the day and present-day New York. So we used imagery of New York from books and films to get the look of the townhouse-style buildings and architecture in the game in keeping with the city, and various other elements you would expect to find in New York. Everybody knew what a New York cop looked like because they appeared in many films. So with everything we tried to give an impression of New York."

> "WE ALWAYS WANTED THE SERIES TO NOT JUST BE BASED IN JAPAN. A LOT OF THAT WAS INFLUENCED BY HIGHLANDER"
>
> MARK CALE

While this change of scene did much to differentiate *Last Ninja 2*, more subtle alterations to the original's formula aided this effort. One tweak made getting around the sequel more combat heavy without the foes being tougher. Instead they regained consciousness after getting knocked out. "In *Last Ninja* you could just knock a guy out and move on, so in *Last Ninja 2* it was an evolution of where we were in the original game," Mark considers. "We were adding a few tweaks to make the game flow a little better, and I think having to knock out enemies three times just helped the gameplay. We felt that it was too easy in *Last Ninja* to take out an opponent and that there wasn't enough of a scene. Like I said, it was an evolution. I wouldn't say it was more or less realistic. It was just to give it more gameplay."

Further innovations helped to distinguish *Last Ninja 2*, including dangerous real-life animals to contend with instead of mythical Japanese dragons and city sewers to navigate instead of medieaval dungeons. As with the follow-up's core influence, its menagerie of deadly creatures took inspiration from the silver screen. "We had those because there were all these funny B-movies, like *Killer Bees* and things like that!" Mark exclaims. "There were films with alligators in the sewers too. So they were pop-culture references. It was just accepted that these things could happen in films, so why not put those elements into a fantasy adventure like *Last Ninja 2*? I mean, you wouldn't want more muggers in the sewers instead. Another reason that we wanted to have sewers in *Last Ninja 2* was that a lot of people liked the dungeons in *Last Ninja*, so we wanted a dungeon feel, which was what we got from the sewers."

As well as the sewers, *Last Ninja 2* boasted many other locations associated with New York. Unlike the settings in *Last Ninja*, the routes between these environments allowed for and encouraged exploration and backtracking rather than leading players along a path from opening screen to level exit. "There was more exploration involved in *Last Ninja 2* because the original was in some places a bit too linear, and we wanted to make the sequel a bit more challenging," Mark recalls. "I think there was a reason why people say *Last Ninja 2* was their favourite *Last Ninja* game. It's probably because it had the right balance. You had a little more depth in the adventure of the game, and trying to find things and work things out. People were more used to that style of gameplay by then, so you could be more progressive in how you made the puzzles."

» [C64] The swarm of bees that attack you in *Last Ninja 2* was inspired by the Seventies movie *Killer Bees*.

» [C64] Jaywalking is frowned upon in *Last Ninja 2*, to the point that you get run over if you even try it.

At the same time as being more complex, *Last Ninja 2*'s challenges were also naturally more intuitive to solve, simply because the sequel's Eighties setting allowed for object and obstacle-based conundrums that involved relatable items and impediments. Although an exception was made for one old but still in use device. "We wanted to make the challenges and puzzles far more logical but at the same time more challenging than they had been in *Last Ninja*," Mark assesses. "Players were more familiar with the items in *Last Ninja 2* because they were more modern, like the traffic lights and the nunchucks in the toilets. That puzzle came about because Victorian toilets had wooden chains to flush them that looked like nunchucks, so we thought those would make good nunchucks! Why not?

> "PLAYERS WERE MORE FAMILIAR WITH THE ITEMS IN LAST NINJA 2 BECAUSE THEY WERE MORE MODERN, LIKE THE TRAFFIC LIGHTS AND THE NUNCHUCKS IN THE TOILETS"
>
> **MARK CALE**

That probably came from going into my granny's flat and thinking, 'Oh! That's a nunchuck if ever I saw one!'"

This focus on logical problem solving was continued even with *Last Ninja 2*'s odder challenges, which included constructing Molotov cocktails to throw at alligators and sending pumas to sleep with sedative-laced chicken. However, these seemingly unlikely puzzles had their roots in strange but true facts. "You weren't going to get a sea serpent in the sewers, but if you put an alligator in then that worked," Mark reasons. "Then there were crazy Americans that had pumas in the Eighties that walked down the streets with them in real life, so we tapped into things like that. So there was all of that weird stuff going on in the Eighties, and that was where a lot of the content in *Last Ninja 2* came from. Something that was great about that era was that because the amount of

» [C64] Taking a bottle from a drunk in *Last Ninja 2* doesn't make sense until you reach the end of the level.

» [C64] There are keys that unlock all sorts of things in *Last Ninja 2*, including sewer manhole covers.

» [C64] You don't have to fight all of the foes in *Last Ninja 2*, you can run past some of them instead.

CONVERSION CAPERS

MEMORABLE ADAPTATIONS OF THE C64 ORIGINAL

ZX SPECTRUM

■ The fact that the Spectrum *Last Ninja 2* faithfully replicates the C64 original in monochrome is impressive, but everything being in black and white means you sometimes can't tell where the ninja is. The pre-game tune is beep-y, and there are no in-game sound effects.

AMSTRAD CPC

■ The Amstrad *Last Ninja 2* could have used the CPC's 16-colour mode, but instead it's a port of the Spectrum version. It also has the same pre-game music instead of a three-voice tune. The one notable difference is that the border around its play area uses less colours.

BBC MICRO

■ The low-resolution four-colour visuals in the BBC Micro *Last Ninja 2* are a little garish, but they do the job. There are a lot less foes, although those you meet are fast and furious, and some of the original's challenges have been replaced with less impressive ones.

NES

■ It's called *The Last Ninja*, but it's actually a port of the second game. It looks and sounds like the original, but it's more console-like. For example, foes leave you to your own devices unless you get really close to them and you can safely jump from high places to the ground.

entertainment on offer was limited people would persevere and discover things, or they would read magazines for hints and tips, and then want to follow those."

To further enhance *Last Ninja 2*'s challenge, its weapons were hidden rather than left lying around or being dropped by foes as sometimes happened in the original. But as in *Last Ninja*, the weaponry available in the sequel was strictly limited to what ninjas of old used. **"I think ninjas were originally hired assassins,"** Mark ponders. "They dressed in black and would hide; they had stealth. They would go out and take out a local warlord or whatever back in Imperial Japan. So the idea of a ninja picking up weapons from people that they had taken out was maybe something they would do in real life, but we wanted to make finding the weapons part of the puzzles. We picked the weapons for *Last Ninja 2* because they were what you would find legendary ninja assassins using. So shuriken throwing stars and ninja swords, and daggers and poisons. Those weapons were from history and legends."

On its release, *Last Ninja 2* made some history of its own in terms of its sales, selling over five million copies on the C64 alone. Decades later, its appeal appears undiminished, certainly if the recent *The Last Ninja Collection* Kickstarter is anything to go by. "The Kickstarter went phenomenally well," Mark beams. "I didn't think there would still be that much love for the *Last Ninja* series after so many years. We hadn't done a Kickstarter before, and we didn't know how well it would go, but it got fully funded in 14 minutes or something. The collection has got C64, Amiga and Spectrum versions of *Last Ninja*, *Last Ninja 2* and *Last Ninja 3*. You've got *The Last Ninja Remix* on there, *International Karate*, *IK+*, and you've got *Bangkok Knights*, so it's a fighting collection. It'll also be available at retail, but the limited-edition versions are only available to the Kickstarter backers."

At the time of writing, *Last Ninja 2* is available on PC as part of the *The Last Ninja Collection* with console versions to follow. Reflecting on how well it has aged over the years, Mark gives a modest reply while recognising its impact at the time and players' continuing fondness for it. "I can't possibly judge my own creation," Mark reviews. "All I can say is that everyone has been blown away at us bringing back memories of how great *Last Ninja 2* was. I would say it still serves a part of the market that wants that kind of experience. In its day, it was one of the best games of that era in terms of sales and reputation. In terms of computer games I think there are very few that had the reputation that *Last Ninja 2* did in that era. It's remarkable that it still gives so many people so much fun in today's world on modern formats." ✱

» [C64] You need to have decent weapons by the later stages of *Last Ninja 2* to fight well-armed enemies.

AMIGA

■ The visual and audio capabilities of the Amiga are put to excellent use in this version of *Last Ninja 2*; it looks and sounds fantastic. The enemies aren't quite as dogged as those in the original, which is good, and some of its setpieces are depicted in more detail.

ATARI ST

■ The Atari ST adaptation of *Last Ninja 2* is identical to the Amiga version in terms of graphics and gameplay, so the only aspect to compare is the ST's music and sound effects. These are good given the system's hardware, but they fall short of those in the Amiga iteration.

PC

■ It's let down by its pre-game tune and in-game sound effects, but the PC version looks as good as the Amiga version. Some of its foes look different, but all of them are as aggressive as those in the original, and they have the best weapons from the first level onwards.

» [C64] A powerful rooftop fan near a steep ledge is just one of *Last Ninja 2*s tests of timing and dexterity.

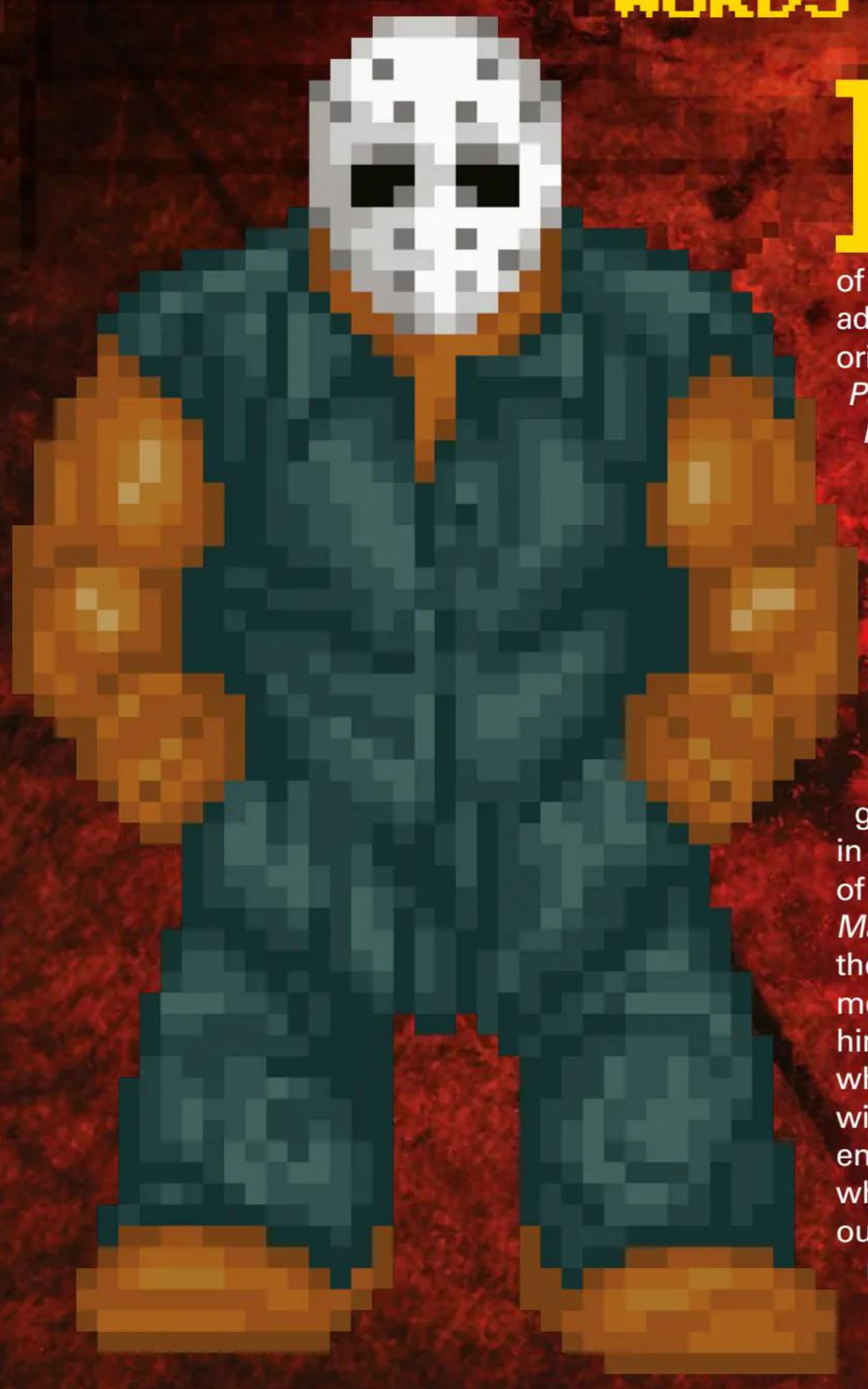
» [C64] The skyscraper platforming challenges in *Last Ninja 2* are not for those with a fear of heights.

ULTIMATE GUIDE

SPLATTERHOUSE

IN A GAME FILLED WITH HORROR CLICHéS, THIS ONE NATURALLY BEGINS ON A DARK AND STORMY NIGHT, WHEN A COUPLE OF KIDS ENTER AN ABANDONED MANSION. JOIN US AS WE TOO STEP INSIDE THE SPLATTERHOUSE – AND IF YOU'RE FEELING FAINT, JUST KEEP REPEATING, "IT'S ONLY A VIDEOGAME… ONLY A VIDEOGAME…"

WORDS BY MARTYN CARROLL



1988 was a great year for horror cinema. The franchises dominated, with the releases of *Hellraiser 2*, *Halloween 4*, *A Nightmare On Elm Street 4* and *Friday The 13th Part 7*. And if you were of the opinion that all those numbers didn't add up to much, there were some great original releases too, including *Child's Play*, *Pumpkinhead*, *Night Of The Demons* and *Killer Klowns From Outer Space*.

The Eighties horror resurgence was on the roll and this naturally influenced the games that popped up in the arcades. Chief amongst these was *Splatterhouse*, Namco's love letter to the decade's grisly successes.

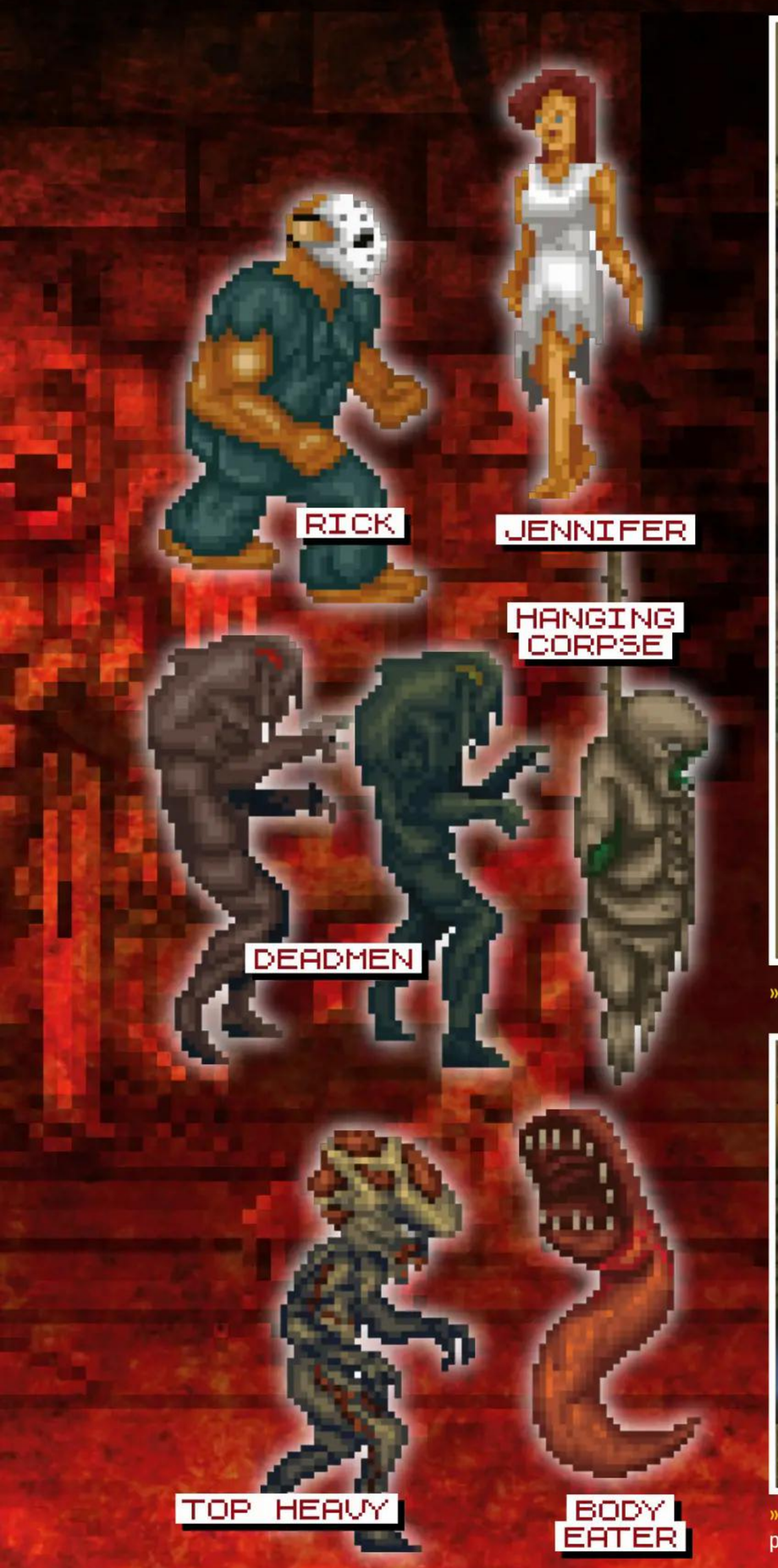
The team behind the game professed a deep love for the genre when interviewed in the Jan/Feb 1989 issue of *Namco Community Magazine NG*. Notably, the game's chief planner, Kazumi Mizuno, mentioned two specific scenes that inspired him: in Dario Argento's *Phenomena* (1985), where the heroine falls into a pool brimming with bodies and maggots, and the shock ending of Brian De Palma's *Carrie* (1976), where young Miss White literally reaches out from beyond the grave. Mizuno also referenced the *Friday The 13th* series, and specifically the sixth part from 1986, where Jason Voorhees came back to life

» [Arcade] The opening scene sees teenage couple Rick and Jennifer sneak inside the sinister West Mansion. Those darn kids!

"BY MAKING THE GAME MORE FANTASTICAL, THEY ACTUALLY MADE IT MORE EXCESSIVE"

(again), only this time as a hulking super zombie capable of snapping people's spines like twigs. This unstoppable version of Jason was the inspiration for Rick Taylor, the game's hero in a hockey mask who has to rescue his girlfriend Jennifer from the cursed West Mansion. The setup borrows heavily from *The Evil Dead* (1981), and the scene where Ash confronts his girlfriend Linda (who's the girl-next-door one moment, a laughing demon the next), is brilliantly replicated in one of the game's boss battles.

The gameplay was conventional, being a scrolling 2D beat-'em-up where enemies



» [Arcade] The slide kick is crucial – but tricky to pull off. You have to jump and then press down, forward and attack just before you land.

» [Arcade] Some scenes, like this one in the flooded basement, use push-scrolling to keep Rick moving along.

» [Arcade] You can only carry one weapon at a time, but if you're clever, you can juggle two shotguns to the battle with the Biggyman.

CONVERSION CAPERS

WE HANG THE FOUR VERSIONS ON A MEAT HOOK FOR CLOSER INSPECTION

PC ENGINE

■ The first conversion is generally excellent. The graphics have been downgraded and the house is a bit sparse in places, but the gore score remains admirably high for a 1990 home release. Note: the TG-16 version has been slightly sanitised, so stick with the original Japanese release.

FM TOWNS

■ Released for Fujitsu's Marty console in 1992, this is almost arcade perfect. We say almost, because the display is narrower, which means single rooms like the first two boss battles actually scroll a little. Not a deal breaker. On the plus side, the CD audio is fantastic.

PC

■ A belated release for the PC, arrived in 2003, and only in Japan. As you'd expect, this one really is arcade perfect. Everything is here, including the consecutive two-player option. There's a bunch of display options too, including one which emulates the coin-op's bezel.

SWITCH

■ Released in 2017, as part of the *Namco Museum* collection, this is the arcade game plus a bunch of extras. All of the dip switch settings are available, plus a new stage select, and there's also a Challenge Mode, where you have to haul points on the tricky fifth stage.

BOSS RUSH

HOW TO BEAT EACH AND EVERY BRAINDEAD BOSS

STAGE 1

BODY EATERS

■ The first 'boss' is basically a room full of bloodsucking Body Eaters. Nice. They will leap from either side of the room and try to gnaw you alive.

HOW TO BEAT THEM: From your starting position, just crouch and keep spamming low kicks to the left and right. There are 20 Body Eaters, plus one hiding inside the corpse.

STAGE 2

POLTERGEIST

■ It's another room of revulsion, where an angry spirit resides. It will hurl bric-a-brac at you, including a chair, a painting, candles, bottles and daggers.

HOW TO BEAT THEM: Head to the right of the room and crouch. Move to avoid falling objects and kick away projectiles. Heed the falling chandelier as it's a one-hit kill.

STAGE 4

EVIL CROSS

■ Inside the chapel you'll encounter a floating upside-down cross being circled by six severed heads that will peel off and attack you. Get thee behind me, Satan!

HOW TO BEAT THEM: Keep walking to the right, fending off the heads until you reach the axe. Use this to smash each head, then let loose on the cross. Six hits should do it.

STAGE 5

JENNIFER

■ Your girlfriend clearly can't handle her spirits. She changes into a snarling, clawed demon, then reverts back and pleads for mercy. She transforms three times.

HOW TO BEAT THEM: When it changes, quickly punch it and then retreat to avoid its claw attack. Repeat this tactic several times through each of the transformations Jennifer goes through.

STAGE 6

MOTHER

■ Mother's going to make all of your nightmares come true. She lies at the end of the 'womb', and protects herself by spawning her bubbly offspring.

HOW TO BEAT THEM: You need to get up close and punch her, er, mass repeatedly (at least 30 times). However, don't ignore the Obas as they will continue to spawn.

» [Arcade] Welcome to the funhouse. Rick gets attacked by his own savage reflection in the Hall Of Mirrors.

» [Arcade] In one of several nods to *Evil Dead II*, the severed arm flips Rick the finger.

» [Arcade] Beware the Blob! If you dawdle, a pulsating purple wall of death will swallow your soul.

STAGE 3

BIGGYMAN

■ We all dread sundown when the Biggyman's around. Wearing a sack over his head and having chainsaws for forearms, he's lively and deadly.

HOW TO BEAT THEM: Hopefully you brought your boomstick to the party, otherwise you'll struggle. Using slide kicks is a viable strategy, if you can master the timing.

STAGE 7

HELL CHAOS

■ The final boss materialises as a melted head with two horribly extended arms. He pops out of the ground several times, flinging rocks into the air.

HOW TO BEAT THEM: Dodge the rocks then go medieaval on that giant noodle. When the arms appear, stay central and jump to avoid them. Repeat until the curtain falls.

"SOME REVIEWERS ASSUMED SPLATTERHOUSE WAS AN OFFICIAL FRIDAY THE 13TH GAME..."

▶ swarm at Rick from either side – a bit like *Kung-Fu Master*, only rated 18, and set in a haunted house. Yet in the *NG* interview, Mizuno revealed that the team wanted to break new ground with the horror elements. "To be blunt, the project's concept was serious. This was totally different from my previous title, *Yokai Douchuuki*, where even scary characters moved in a cute way. This time we wanted to make the scary characters actually scary. That was tough."

Tougher still, Namco's management wasn't totally on board with the 'serious' tone. "We were forced to make a lot of changes," Mizuno concedes. "Originally the blood was red and the zombies were realistic. But since the whole premise involved killing, realism became a problem. In the end, the blood was changed to fluorescent green and the zombies became more like aliens."

The irony here is that by making the game more fantastical, the team actually made it more excessive, more extreme. On the very first screen there's an oversized meat cleaver you can use to behead your enemies – and their heads don't just pop off, they fly into the air on a geyser of green blood. A bit further on you can grab a piece of 2x4 and smack enemies aside, decorating the walls with their innards. And all this glorious, Grand-Guignol theatre is soundtracked by a series of thuds, thwacks, screams and shouts.

The name *Splatterhouse* was perfect, referencing the splatter film subgenre that so inspired the game. According to John McCarty's 1981 book on the subject, *Splatter Movies*, these films, "Aim not to scare their audiences, nor to drive them to the edges of their seats in suspense, but to mortify them with scenes of explicit gore. In splatter movies, mutilation is indeed the message – many times the only one." With *Splatterhouse*, was mutilation the only message? Most critics at the time seemed to think so. "[It's] a mundane enough beat-'em-up made bearable by some spectacularly gory hackabilia," wrote *Commodore User* in March 1989. "Take away the gore however and the basic game is really rather humdrum, unvarying and generally naff." *The Games Machine* concurred, "Simple gameplay, devoid of anything new, but worth a look for the 'interesting' graphics." *CVG* was also dismissive, "There's nothing subtle or nice about *Splatterhouse*. If coin-ops could give out smells, this one would reek of an abattoir." Now there's a quote Namco should have used in its marketing.

Interestingly, some reviewers assumed it was an official *Friday The 13th* game, and that Rick was actually Jason. Perhaps to avoid confusion (and a lawsuit from Paramount Pictures), changes to Rick's mask were required. The 1990 PC Engine conversion released in Japan retained the familiar hockey mask, but for the Western TurboGrafx-16 release it was swapped for a weird purple-coloured alternative. Some 'religious' elements were also censored, such as the fourth stage's inverted cross boss and altar scene. Cuts aside, the home release did raise some questions about the game's violent content, which resulted in a warning on the box, "The horrifying ▶

theme of this game may be inappropriate for young children… and cowards." Nicely done, Namco Of America.

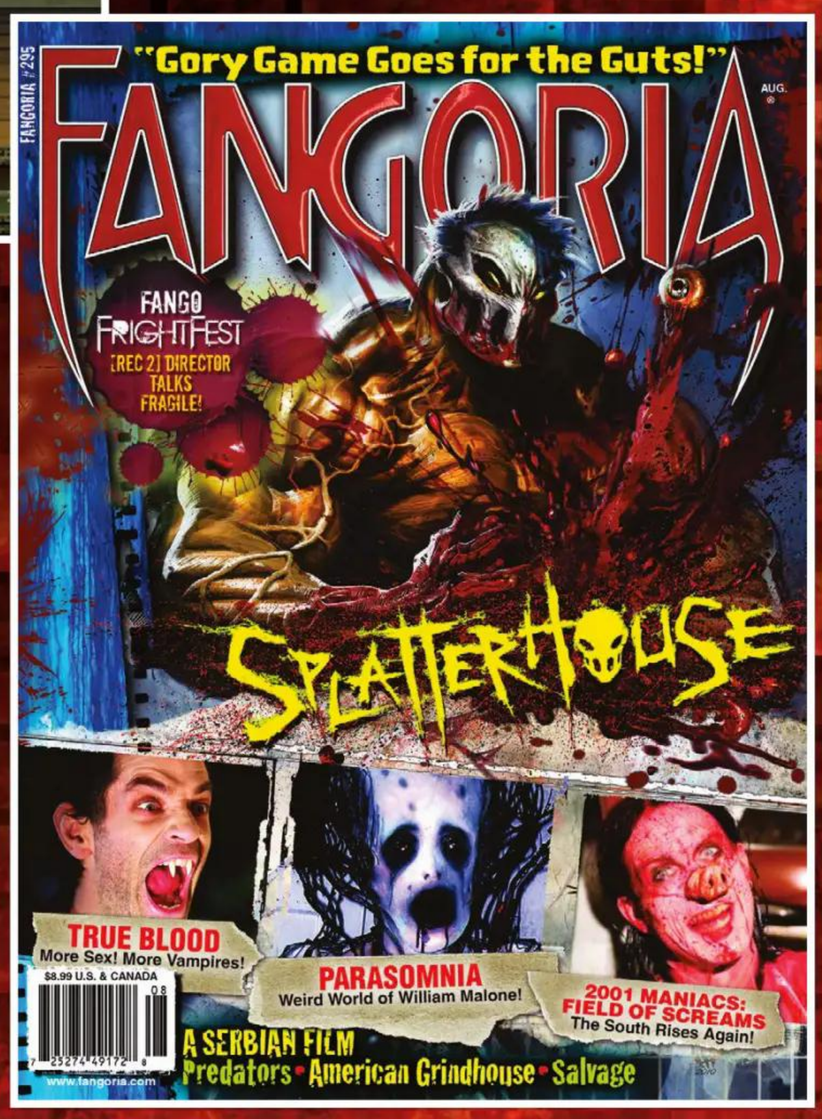
In 1992 the game was released for the FM Towns Marty console, exclusively in Japan. A Mega Drive conversion was widely anticipated, but instead the system received a direct sequel. Forgoing the arcades, *Splatterhouse 2* invited Rick inside a new house of horrors in a bid to resurrect Jennifer. The purple mask from the TG-16 version was ditched, but the new one was subtly redesigned to become more skull-like. *Splatterhouse 3* arrived in 1993, again only on the Mega Drive (and not in Europe this time). Set five years later, the third game saw our hero, who could now transform into Super Rick, having to rescue Jennifer and their son David from yet more cellar dwellers.

Aside from a brief Rick cameo in *Point Blank 3*, the series lay dormant until 2010, when not one but two new releases arrived. The first was an update of the coin-op for iOS devices, which suffered from the usual iffy touch-screen controls, but did add a Rush mode where you had to survive an onslaught for two minutes. The second was a full reboot for the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3. The new game, which was pretty full-on throughout, in-line with the horror cinema of the period, received a mixed reception but has since been reappraised more positively.

In a nice touch, the original coin-op and two Mega Drive sequels were included as unlockable bonuses. The only title missing from this *Splatterhouse* reunion party was the cutesy 1989 Famicom spin-off *Wanpaku Graffiti*, which was only released in Japan. Happily, this overlooked entry finally received a Western release in 2020 as part of the *Namco Museum Archives Vol 1* collection for PC and console. The coin-op was also included on the Switch compilation Namco Museum in 2017, and later released as a stand-alone download on Switch and PS4.

Beyond the various re-releases, the series is now kept alive by various fan projects. These include a number of PC reimaginings and a fantastic-looking WIP conversion of the coin-op for the Mega Drive, so the original trilogy will be playable on the Sega system. It seems unlikely at this point that Namco will bring back the series, but then horror icons never really die, do they? Just like Jason Voorhees and Michael Myers, we imagine Rick Taylor is skulking in the shadows, just waiting to return. ✱

"A MEGA DRIVE CONVERSION WAS WIDELY ANTICIPATED, BUT INSTEAD THE SYSTEM RECEIVED A DIRECT SEQUEL"



» Move over Freddy and Jason. Rick takes centre stage on the August 2010 issue of *Fangoria* to promote Namco's remake.

THE ANNALS OF SPLATTER

WHAT HAPPENED WHEN RICK CRAVED NEW BLOOD

SPLATTERHOUSE: WANPAKU GRAFFITI

■ This Famicom parody of the coin-op substitutes brawling for platforming and gory graphics for cartoon caricatures. It's sometimes silly, often hilarious, and features two lovely endings – one smashes the fourth wall, the other positions this as a prequel to the coin-op.

SPLATTERHOUSE 2

■ Although billed as a sequel, and featuring a continuation of the storyline, this is best viewed as the Mega Drive conversion of the coin-op. The gameplay is almost identical, with just enough new content to keep fans entertained. And you do get to wield your own chainsaw.

SPLATTERHOUSE 3

■ The third game is what the second should have been – an excellent spin on the formula and a fresh challenge, with refined beat-'em-up gameplay (you can now move freely around the screen, not just on one plane). It also adds non-linear progression and multiple endings.

SPLATTERHOUSE

■ This imaginative (and incendiary) 2010 remake blends gore galore and jet-black humour to winning effect. It's technically a little rough, but it's hard to care when it's so much fun. It also features a delightful turn from Jim Cummings as the razor-sharp voice of the mask.

» [TurboGrafx-16] Rick dons a purple mask in the conversion, presumably to avoid the wrath of Jason Voorhees (and his legal representatives).

» [Mega Drive] Currently in development, *Mega Splatterhouse* is an impressive fan port from sceners DMM069 and Cyberdeous.

PRODUCER Q&A

DAN TOVAR RECALLS THE DIFFICULT BIRTH OF THE 2010 REMAKE

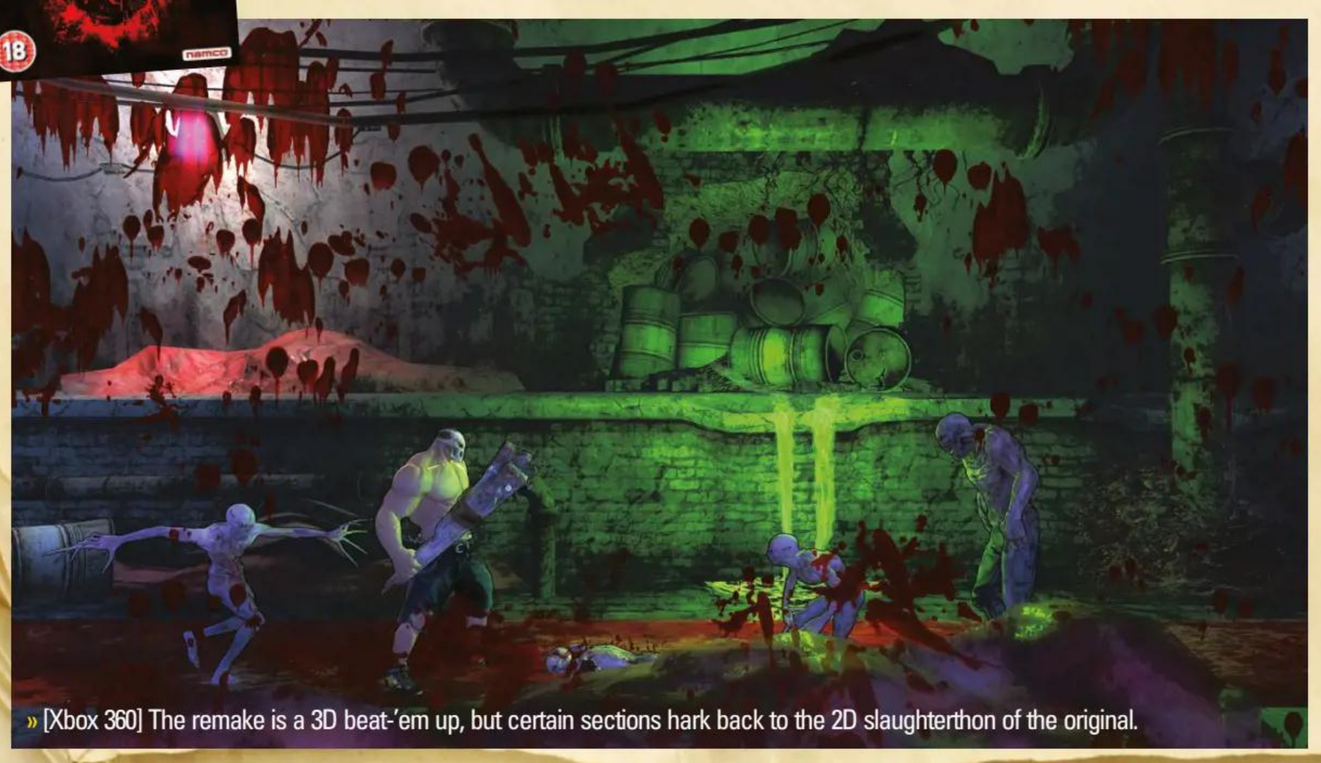
What was your role in *Splatterhouse*'s remake and what did it involve?
My role in the remake was pretty pervasive. The original pitch was written in 2007 by myself and my co-worker Mark Brown. Our boss at the time had us working on a pitch for a sequel to *Dead To Rights*, but Mark and I were obsessed that Namco owned the rights to *Splatterhouse* and created a pitch for that out of our love for the content. The original had such amazing horror movie vibes and was so full of monsters and gore – we loved that. The pitch went all the way through the leadership in the US office and then to the Japan office and was ultimately greenlit. After that, I was involved in all of the development steps with the BottleRocket team, including the spin down of the studio and the rebuilding of Studio Kaizen with some of the remnants. In the end, I was the only person on the team from the beginning to the very difficult end.

How much inspiration did you draw from the original games?
The original games were a huge inspiration, from the characters and story elements, to the monster design and soundtrack. We would go back and reference the games all the time. We spent so much time going through those games that it became important to me to be able to share them with the next generation, which is why I fought to have them ported and included as unlocks in the 2010 version. We even collaborated with one of the *Splatterhouse* fan groups in order to get their thoughts on how the modern game tied back.

The final game is super gory. Was there any internal debate that the game might have been too extreme?
The gore was core for us. *Splatterhouse* was always ultra violent and pushed the limits of videogame blood and guts. I don't recall there being concerns about it being too extreme. We basically used the ESRB's M-rating as a checklist to make sure we were pushing things to their limit. We had teams dedicated to blood FX and gore physics. It was a very fun process. The reviews usually wanted things to go further, not pulled back.

"THE GORE WAS CORE FOR US"

Splatterhouse's development had a few hurdles. Looking back now, how close to your original vision was the released game?
The development did go through some significant and difficult challenges. The vision of the game changed a lot even in the early stages of working with BottleRocket. There was a shared vision in what was key to the franchise but the execution just didn't come into focus. The drift between where we started and where we needed to be at those later stages wound up being the undoing of that relationship. But there were a lot of folks that still believed in the game and wanted to see it through. In the end, it wound up much more in line with my original thinking than the midpoint progress, but reflecting on it now, it is still very different from the original pitch. We had to cut so much in order to get it over the finish line and there were elements that didn't get the level of polish we would have preferred. But I'm still incredibly proud of how it turned out and it's still, despite its controversial reception, one of my favourite games that I've produced.



» [Xbox 360] The remake is a 3D beat-'em up, but certain sections hark back to the 2D slaughterthon of the original.

THE EVOLUTION OF SHINOBI

WHEN NINJAS RULED THE POP CULTURE LANDSCAPE, SHINOBI AMAZED ARCADE-GOERS AND BLEW MINDS ON THE MEGA DRIVE. WITH JOE MUSASHI COMING OUT OF RETIREMENT, WE LOOK BACK AT HOW THIS CLASSIC ACTION SERIES HAS CHANGED OVER NEARLY FOUR DECADES

WORDS BY NICK THORPE

If we've learned one thing about ninjas over the years, it's that they're supposed to be stealthy. Whether you look at their historical jobs of spying on enemies and sabotaging them, or their popular depiction as shadowy assassins able to disappear in a puff of smoke, the key thing is that their activities are covert. When you see Joe Musashi in the very first *Shinobi* game, walking through the city streets and slinging shurikens without so much as a mask to protect his identity, you do wonder who trained him.

Then again, perhaps it's no surprise that he ended up that way. After all, modern spies are supposed to act in secret too – if they have to resort to shooting dozens of multicoloured goons, something has obviously gone very wrong. Yet that was exactly what you did in Namco's arcade game *Rolling Thunder*, and Sega borrowed more than a casual disregard for stealth from that game. The design of *Shinobi* was led by Yutaka Sugano, a relatively recent hire who had previously worked on *Alex Kidd: The Lost Stars*, and he adopted a broadly similar run-and-gun style that even aped the way secret agent Albatross would perform giant jumps to upper levels of the play area. However, players were won over in greater numbers by the exploits of the American ninja, Joe Musashi.

"While the spy theme of *Rolling Thunder* is cool, I think ninjas are just cooler," says Kurt Kalata of Hardcore Gaming 101. "This is especially true since it was released in the mid-Eighties, back when they seemed pretty dangerous and before they got cartoonified with stuff like *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*." The ninja theme also attracted Mel Taylor, better known on YouTube as Sega Lord X, who first encountered the game at his local arcade Fun N Games. "Anything with ninjas in the Eighties was an immediate attention getter, and I must say I was blown away by the bonus round's visuals." What's so impressive about the very first *Shinobi* game is that it establishes pretty much all of the core thematic elements that would carry through the series. "What really stands out to me is the variety in the setting. It's a modern world with a touch of sci-fi, so you're not just fighting ninjas and soldiers – you're also up against robots and monsters," says Toru Ohara, a Sega staff member who joined the company in 1993. Indeed, you start off fighting regular gunmen and ninjas in an urban environment, but by the end of the game you'll have taken on skeletal warriors, the robotic boss Mandara and more.

> "WHILE THE SPY THEME OF ROLLING THUNDER IS COOL, I THINK NINJAS ARE JUST COOLER"
> KURT KALATA

"On top of that, the main character is a super ninja who can take on all these powerful enemies using a wide range of special techniques," says Ohara. In the first game, Joe Musashi did have his shurikens as well as secondary, close-range weapons that were automatically used when enemies were in range. However, the most ▶

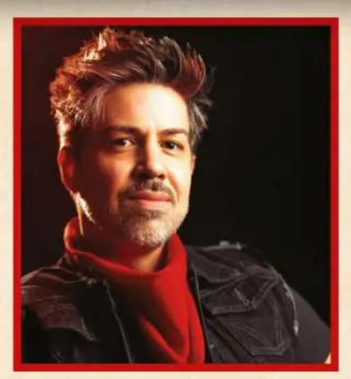
INTERVIEWEES

BEN FIQUET
Lizardcube CEO, *Shinobi: Art Of Vengeance*

KURT KALATA
Owner and writer, Hardcore Gaming 101

MEL TAYLOR
Popular Youtuber, better known as Sega Lord X

SACHA SZYMONIAK
Lizardcube producer, *Shinobi: Art Of Vengeance*



TEE LOPES
Musician, *Shinobi: Art Of Vengeance*

TORU OHARA
Sega producer, *Shinobi: Art Of Vengeance*

» [Arcade] *Shinobi* was a thoroughly modern ninja experience, rather than sticking to historical depictions.

» [Arcade] A good dose of ninjutsu will do plenty of damage to the bosses, so use it wisely.

STAGES OF EVOLUTION

BONUS STAGES

HOW THE STAGES BETWEEN STAGES DEVELOPED WITH TIME

SHINOBI

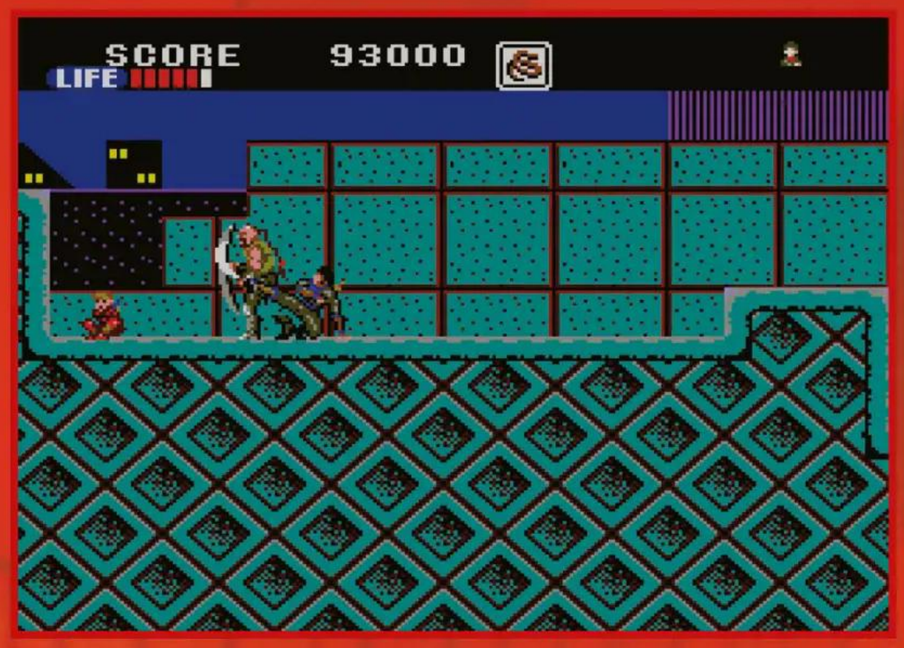
■ This one's a classic – you take a first-person perspective and start flinging shurikens like your life depends on it, as enemy ninjas run in from the sides of the screen and advance toward you. Fail to take them all out and you'll have one leap right into your face, denying you a coveted extra life.

SHADOW DANCER

■ It feels rather like Sega didn't want to change too much here, as mechanically this is very similar to before. You look up a tall building as ninjas emerge from doorways and begin to jump down. Once again, failure results in a big close-up, though we think the original ninja was cooler than big boot boy here.

SHADOW DANCER (MEGA DRIVE)

■ Tall buildings again here, but this time you're the one doing the plummeting, with the goal of taking out enemy ninjas as you fall. The enemies have more obvious formations here, so it doesn't feel quite as chaotic as the previous bonus games do – but it's not as visually exciting, either.



» [Master System] Sega's 8-bit conversion is really the bridging point between the arcade origins and console-style games.

STAGES OF EVOLUTION

POWER-UPS

EVERY NINJA NEEDS A GOOD WEAPON NOW AND THEN

SHINOBI (MASTER SYSTEM)

■ Joe Musashi might be a little more leisurely on the Master System, but his arcade counterpart never got to play with nunchaku, did he? These extend the range of your melee attack if you're lucky enough to get some, which is quite nice against these leaping scuba ninjas in the second stage.

THE REVENGE OF SHINOBI

■ That little POW icon is your best friend in this game, giving you access to flaming shurikens and an upgraded sword attack, which gives off a nice crescent-shaped swoosh when used. They're both very powerful, but you lose them if you take a hit, so try not to do that, won't you?

SHINOBI X

■ Grab the sword upgrade in the Saturn game, and every time you swing it a great big Bishamon apparition will appear behind you, which can damage enemies. It's an odd effect that is quite jarring when first seen, but fits in with Bishamon's role as a god of warriors in Japanese culture.

visually striking moves were the ninjutsu techniques, ninja magic attacks that could be activated in a pinch to clear out a screen full of enemies or do damage to the bosses. In comparison to *Rolling Thunder*, Kurt points out that, "[*Shinobi*] also has a more advanced design, with a larger variety in levels and proper boss fights. *Shinobi* makes a big deal of this with the maps and the boss portraits in the mid-level screens!" Sega's game also required players to rescue kidnapped ninja apprentices throughout each stage, and the first-person bonus stage allowed players to win extra lives between stages.

» [Arcade] "Oh, he never normally does this," protests a ninja who has seen his dog do that repeatedly.

***Shinobi* was a big success in arcades upon its release in late-1987, particularly in the USA, and the game was inevitably converted to a variety of platforms.** The most important one was Sega's own Master System version, as it kicked off a process of divergent evolution. Though largely faithful in terms of level design, the 8-bit conversion directed by Katsuhiro Hasegawa made a variety of mechanical changes suited to the home market, and also made an important story contribution in creating the evil Zeed organisation. "The original arcade *Shinobi* is always pushing you forward with a tight time limit. That works in arcades, which are rushing you to play through (and die) as fast as possible, but console games don't need to be quite as speedy," says Kurt. "The slower speed of the Master System version was probably more of a result of technical limitations than anything intentional, but that pacing did carry forward to *The Revenge Of Shinobi*. The life bar is also quite welcome, since again, console games didn't need to be quite as brutal as their arcade counterparts." Rescuing hostages was no longer mandatory, though you'd be a fool to pass them up as they held power-ups, and it was much harder to use ninjutsu as you had to win it in bonus stages.

The first sequel to *Shinobi* was an arcade game called *Shadow Dancer*, released in 1989. Since Sugano had relocated to America, the new game was developed by new staff. Hostages were replaced with time bombs that needed to be defused and the unnamed ninja protagonist was now clad in white, but otherwise the game followed the template of its coin-op predecessor very closely – you'd still die from a single hit and had basically the same abilities, save for one big change. This time around, you had a dog. You could send the dog charging towards an enemy by holding down and pressing the attack button, and if it connected while they were vulnerable, the dog would prevent them attacking and leave them open for an attack. If you mistimed the attack though, the dog would take a hit and temporarily shrink into a puppy form.

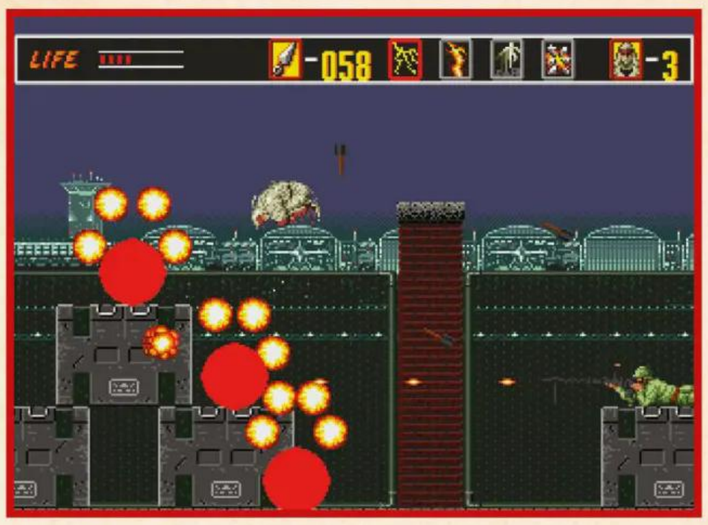
» [Arcade] *Shadow Dancer* upped the drama when the player pushed the ninjutsu button, with full-screen interludes.

While *Shadow Dancer* continued the arcade lineage of the series, a development team headed up by Noriyoshi Ohba was creating *The Revenge Of Shinobi* for the Mega Drive. In a 2003 interview with Sega's Japanese website, translated by shmuplations.com, he explained that due to the differences in play style between the home and arcade market, the new game "needed a gameplay system that would make players feel like they've got their money's worth". Though the Master System version wasn't a reference point, Ohba and his team came to many of the same conclusions – Joe Musashi did need a life bar and access to plenty of pick-ups in his quest to rescue his beloved Naoko from Neo Zeed, but the time limit and hostage rescue mechanic could be scrapped. The changes went further this time, though. If you found the power-up icon in a crate, you were able to guard against enemy shurikens and bullets while walking or crouching. More notably, Joe's high jump was replaced with a somersault double jump. This wasn't just a useful tool to gain extra height in the taller stages – for a start, if you pressed the attack button during the somersault, Joe would fling out a spectacular spread of shuriken, though it wasn't advisable to overuse this move as the supply of projectiles was limited for the first time in the series. More importantly, certain stages incorporated multiple planes of action and the double jump was your means of switching between the two.

> "THE ORIGINAL ARCADE SHINOBI IS ALWAYS PUSHING YOU FORWARD WITH A TIGHT TIME LIMIT"
> KURT KALATA

The Revenge Of Shinobi didn't just make great strides in game design, though – as a high-profile game for the Mega Drive, it needed to show off what Sega's relatively new 16-bit machine could do. Critics lauded the visuals as arcade quality, and the game's memorable soundtrack by Yuzo Koshiro really defined the sound of the series from that point on. "It was one of the soundtracks that introduced me to an array of musical genres that, up until that point, I just wasn't familiar with," says Tee Lopes, musician on *Shinobi: Art Of Vengeance*. "It was just the kind of stuff that didn't play on the radio, and the mix of then-modern elements in the music with the traditional Japanese elements was just mind-blowing to me, because it was a completely new soundscape that I had never heard before." From the rock stylings of *Like A Wind* to the contemporary dance style of *Ninja Step*, there was plenty of variety in the high-quality compositions that make up one of the console's most memorable soundtracks. The game was a big success and had great longevity because it became a staple of compilation cartridges as the Mega Drive aged. For a short time, the two styles

» [Mega Drive] Rambo, Batman and Godzilla were just a few of the pop culture icons that featured in the first Japanese version of *Revenge*.



» [Mega Drive] Joe has just sprayed soldiers with shurikens while leaping over the fence.

overlapped. *Shadow Dancer* received various conversions, but the Mega Drive game was even more drastically different from its arcade counterpart than the Master System's *Shinobi* conversion had been. Once again, a new team was in charge of the game, with notable names including game designer Tomohiro Kondo, who would go on to produce *Panzer Dragoon*, and artist Rieko Kodama. This version shared the core concepts of its arcade namesake, including the dog-assisted combat and one-hit deaths, but switched the bombs out for hostages once more and replaced the stages with brand-new designs. These only occasionally resembled the originals, and the brand-new burning city and Statue Of Liberty stages were arguably more memorable than anything from the arcade game. The Mega Drive's *Shadow Dancer* was well received upon its release in 1990, though not quite to the same extent as *The Revenge Of Shinobi*, but it proved to be the last game in the arcade-style evolutionary line. Why? "Variety and versatility," says Mel. "There's more to do in the *Revenge*-style design. More choice in how you approach the enemies and level design. I think it was a natural progression from the original arcade intent – bigger stages, more attacks, more magic," he says. "Plus, the average gamer doesn't appreciate being dropped in a single hit."

The world would have to wait for the true successor to *The Revenge Of Shinobi* though, with 8-bit consoles hosting the series in the meantime. *The Cyber Shinobi* for Master System is better forgotten, being a slow game with choppy scrolling and far too many platforms that dropped away under your feet without any warning. Game Gear owners got a much more interesting game in 1991, titled *The GG Shinobi* in Japan and simply *Shinobi* everywhere else. Katsuhiro Hasegawa returned from the Master System *Shinobi* for this one, with Yuzo Koshiro on audio duties once again, and we were treated to another evolutionary branch from the main console-style games. If you're familiar with the *Mega Man* games, the structure will seem familiar – players started with Joe Musashi and could choose to tackle the first four stages in any order, with a new ninja unlocked after completing each one. All of them possessed their own unique weapons and abilities, and when the full quintet was assembled, you could challenge the fifth and final stage which required all of their skills.

> "SHINOBI WAS SUCH A STAPLE OF THE SEGA EXPERIENCE THAT IF ANY GAME DESERVED TO EVOLVE INTO SOMETHING MORE, THAT WAS CERTAINLY IT"
> MEL TAYLOR

A sequel followed right at the end of 1992, and was created in just a few months by a small team. It's actually one of the few *Shinobi* games with much more team continuity, with Masahide Kobayashi, Yuichi Matsuoka and Ryo Kudou returning from the first game as planner, programmer and artist respectively, with Yuzo Koshiro returning on audio alongside frequent collaborator Motohiro Kawashima. The game followed the same format as before, but allowed players to return to completed stages as they now had to find hidden elemental crystals as well as rescuing the multicoloured ninjas. It's another excellent outing and the pair are easily among the best Game Gear games, but sadly, the series never reprised this format. "I feel that Sega really missed a grand opportunity to take *Shinobi* in a bold new direction – if not on the Genesis, then certainly on the Saturn," says Mel, who has often said that he wishes Sega had tried an expanded version of the Game Gear formula on its less portable platforms. "*Shinobi* was such a staple of the Sega experience that if any game deserved to evolve into something more, that was certainly it."

Joe Musashi's return to the Mega Drive was not an easy one. *Shinobi III: Return Of The Ninja Master* was developed by a short-lived Sega subsidiary called Megasoft, under the supervision of *The Revenge Of Shinobi* director Noriyoshi Ohba. The team had been formed in December 1991 when Sega acquired various staff and unfinished projects from the developer Santos, and it designed the game as a direct sequel to *The Revenge Of Shinobi*. *Shinobi III* was originally intended for a late-1992 release and got so far into development that it was sent out for review, only to receive a rather muted critical reception. As a result, Sega took the game back into development for six months and significantly reworked it prior to release in the summer of 1993 – a risky decision, but one justified by the quality of the final product.

"I'm a big fan of *Shinobi III*, especially," says Tee. "That's the point when the movements became really fluid, and the character started running and wall jumping, and all of those crazy acrobatic things." Much like its predecessor, *Shinobi III* pitted Joe Musashi against Neo Zeed, but Joe had significantly picked up the pace since *The Revenge Of Shinobi*. As well as being able to run and jump off walls, Joe could hang from overhead cables and climb across them. New combat moves included a diving kick and a guard stance that could be manually activated, and there were brand-new high-speed sections on horseback and a surfboard to add some variety. Frankly though, the level design was rather varied without them – memorable stages include one that challenged you to work around obstacles as you ascended on a lift, another with a giant mutant

» [Mega Drive] The bridge stage is one of the few concepts shared with the arcade version of *Shadow Dancer*.

» [Mega Drive] This burning city was a totally new stage for *Shadow Dancer* on Sega's home hardware.

STAGES OF EVOLUTION

THE CHOPPER

FOR SOME REASON, NINJAS AND HELICOPTERS ARE NATURAL ENEMIES

SHINOBI

■ The second boss of the game, Black Turtle, packs some pretty fearsome missiles. Those are the least of your worries though, as it's also full of deadly yellow ninjas that constantly leap out to attack you. Hit the engine on the front of the vehicle enough times and you'll disable it for good.

SHADOW DANCER (MEGA DRIVE)

■ This one's not a boss, but it definitely makes its presence known. As you ascend the Statue Of Liberty, a chopper will sweep by periodically and shoot up the ground. You'll need to leap over the gunfire to stay alive. You can't defeat it – your only choice is to avoid it until the stage ends.

SHINOBI (PS2)

■ Your first 3D boss encounter is a nod to tradition, and you simply have to get in close, leap up and whack this one with your sword. Enemies will spawn in to attack you as you fight, but this is a relatively easy battle in a very hard game. Just be warned that you haven't seen the last of the chopper.

» [Master System] Playing *The Cyber Shinobi* is like being on social media, you're constantly fighting off the bots.

» [Master System] This enemy looks more like a wrestler than a ninja, to be honest.

» [Game Gear] More ninjas means more abilities, which let you tackle stages in the optimal way.

STAGES OF EVOLUTION

LEADING LIGHTS

WHO'S TAKEN THE MOST PROMINENT STARRING ROLES SO FAR?

JOE MUSASHI

■ By far the most prominent star of the *Shinobi* series, American ninja Joe began as a weak member of the Oboro clan, who gained strength and skill through diligent training. He's often distinguished by his white and red clothing. His games typically involve conflict with the Zeed organisations.

HOTSUMA

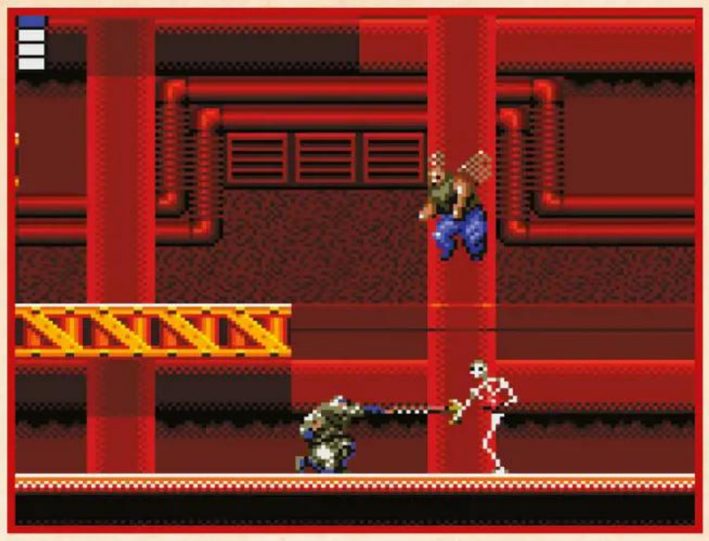
■ The star of the PS2 *Shinobi* is a tortured soul – he had to kill his own elder brother in combat to become leader of the Oboro clan, and got the cursed sword Akujiki for his troubles. He fights to rid Tokyo of the sorcerer Hiruko, whose demonic hordes are causing chaos in the city.

HIBANA

■ *Shinobi*'s first female protagonist doesn't usually show her face this much, nor does she have much love for the Oboro clan – she was given up for adoption and in *Nightshade*, works for the government. Alongside Hotsuma, she appears in the 3DS crossover game *Project X Zone 2*.

» [Game Gear] Only Blue can get over a big gap in the castle roof, thanks to his grappling hook.

» [Game Gear] Yellow can throw a shuriken, which has plenty of range to hit distant enemies.



» [Game Gear] You need a specific ninja to access this area, which hides the crystal you need.

» [Saturn] As well as digitised sprites, *Shinobi X* makes light use of 3D elements.

» [Saturn] The 32-bit game rewards patient players who remember to guard against enemy attacks.

▶ that constantly targeted you from afar, and one set wholly on falling rocks. *Shinobi III* may not have done much that was really new, but everything it did, it did better than almost anything else. "That gameplay had a feel and a flow that few games of the era could compete with," says Mel. "The visuals and audio were just icing on the cake. There were numerous ways to approach and dispatch enemies. It added just enough over *Revenge* to make it the pinnacle of the series."

The pace of technological development in the Nineties meant that the next *Shinobi* was in a tough spot. *Shinobi X* – or *Shinobi Legions*, for our American readers – launched on the Saturn in 1995, and was developed by Tose with Ohba once again supervising. The presentation was radically overhauled, with digitised sprites that gave the game a look that the Mega Drive couldn't have carried off, and one that has proven divisive over the years. The music also moved away from the signature blend of traditional Japanese styles and modern sensibilities that Yuzo Koshiro had established. This was too much for Sega Europe, which had Richard Jacques create a new soundtrack more in keeping with what had become tradition by that point. The story was told with FMV cutscenes, and focussed on the new protagonist Sho and his fellow heirs to the ninja traditions, Aya and the treacherous Kazuma.

Only minor tweaks were made when it came to the traditional gameplay, though. *Shinobi X* played much like the Mega Drive games, though arguably not quite as smoothly as its immediate forebear, but it did have a distinct flavour of its own. Shurikens were strictly limited, so much more emphasis was placed on close-range sword attacks, as well as guarding against enemy attacks. How did Mel feel about this increased focus on melee combat? "I think it was a bold choice, and had they expanded the core gameplay into something resembling the Game Gear games to give fans more to chew on, it may have worked," he says. "In the end, it felt like a retread of what the 16-bit games gave us, and at the time, that was a big mistake. Saturn *Shinobi* was a very decent game, but in the face of the 32-bit onslaught of new ideas and genres, it missed the mark with many fans." After eight years of being one of Sega's most prominent properties, the *Shinobi* series went on an extended hiatus for the first time.

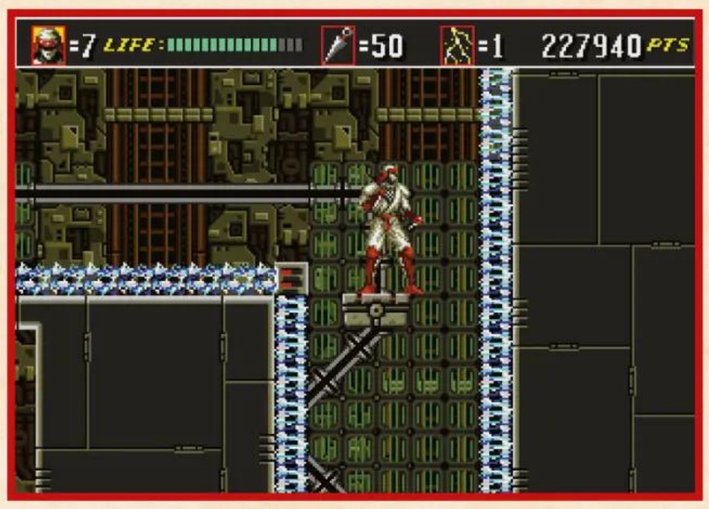
> "I REMEMBER HOW THE TEAM TRIED TO CREATE A NEW CHARACTER INSTEAD OF JOE MUSASHI"
> TORU OHARA

When *Shinobi* returned in 2002, everything had changed – 2D games were firmly out of fashion and Sega was no longer making consoles. The new 3D hack-and-slash game was developed by Overworks, a Sega studio headed by Ohba. "I remember how the team tried to create a new character instead of Joe Musashi," says Ohara, who was working on other games at Overworks at the time. The result was Hotsuma, a new member of the Oboro clan whose dark ninja garb was offset by a flowing scarf. "It was a great experience to watch up close as the creative team tried to express both stylish character design and the visual impact of the red scarf's movement, blending game design and graphics in a unique way," says Ohba. That scarf highlighted the game's smooth graphical performance and added a real sense of style, which was necessary as the game's environments could get a little repetitive.

Still, there was plenty to like about the game. "They captured the modern urban fantasy/Japanese mysticism part very well. But mechanically, it's almost nothing like the older games," says Kurt. "This was pretty standard for 3D games of the era, which often tried to maintain the vibes of their predecessors but did whatever they wanted with 3D gameplay, instead of adapting 2D gameplay to the third dimension." The PS2 *Shinobi* would often box you into areas with a number of enemies that needed to be defeated in order to progress, and this was often achieved with stylish combos that froze enemies in place until their sliced bodies slid apart. "It was very difficult to pull off the combos in *Shinobi* but it was a blast once you got into the groove of it, so it is very old school in design," says Kurt. One aspect of that old school design came from Akujiki, Hotsuma's cursed sword. You needed to kill enemies to keep the sword's thirst for souls sated, essentially meaning that you were working to a time limit. The other aspect was the game's punishing difficulty level, which was extreme even by the standards of a typically tough series.

The team followed up with a sequel called *Nightshade* in 2003, which was also exclusive to the PlayStation 2. This time around the lead was Hibana, a female ninja from the Oboro clan, whose red and white clothing ▶

» [Mega Drive] *Shinobi III*'s surfing and horseback bits aren't complex, but they change the pace nicely.



» [Mega Drive] Watch that path the platform is taking, and you'll know it's about time to jump.

» [PlayStation 2] Arachnophobia is no problem for Hotsuma. Eight legs? That's just more limbs to slice off.

» [PlayStation 2] Hotsuma stands there stoically as his foes die very gruesome deaths.

» [3DS] Jiro Musashi pulls off a somersault jump here, right next to an unfriendly looking robot.

evoked memories of past *Shinobi* games. The game attempted to remedy some of the criticisms of the original, with a guard-breaking kick move added to Hibana's arsenal and no soul-stealing swords to worry about. The game also facilitated far longer combos, but often required you to perform aerial dashes mid-combo in order to reach higher places and cross deadly pits, which could be frustrating if you dropped the combo mid-way through. "I felt *Nightshade* leaned much too heavily on the frustrating deaths, but I still like the overall feel of the gameplay," says Mel. Kurt notes that the games were ultimately overshadowed by *Ninja Gaiden* on the Xbox "which had a much larger budget, grander design, and combat that better gelled with modern sensibilities despite the game also being extremely difficult".

The series again went on hiatus, returning with a 3DS game in 2011 that once again was simply called *Shinobi*. This reboot was developed by the American studio Griptonite Games, and starred Joe Musashi's father Jiro Musashi. The game used 3D visuals but played in 2D, and was primarily inspired by *Shinobi III* – however, new combat moves were once again introduced, most notably a defensive parry. The game was moderately well received, with plenty of criticism of its difficulty level. "*Shinobi* 3D is one of those games designed to evoke old school fun, and for the most part, it succeeds," Mel concurs. "It falls well short of the Genesis titles mainly because the developer cranked up the cheap deaths towards the end, and the combat becomes quite repetitive."

In 2025, the series has returned with *Shinobi: Art Of Vengeance*. The game has been developed by the French studio Lizardcube, which previously developed *Wonder Boy: The Dragon's Trap* and *Streets Of Rage 4*, in collaboration with Sega. "I was genuinely surprised to have the chance to work on *Shinobi*, a legendary Sega IP that's been around since before I even joined the company," says Ohara, who is overseeing the project from Sega's side. "I originally planned to share the key points of *Shinobi* – especially *The Revenge Of Shinobi* – but Lizardcube are extremely knowledgeable and have incorporated many elements from past *Shinobi* titles. So instead, I focussed on providing feedback on the game design."

"We tried to look at all the different games that have been made for *Shinobi* and tried to incorporate what we thought would fit the most. And ultimately, the main inspiration would be [*The Revenge Of Shinobi*] and *Shinobi III*," says Lizardcube CEO Ben Fiquet, who has been a fan of the series since the Master System days. *Shinobi: Art Of Vengeance* takes place across distinct stages like traditional *Shinobi* games, but they're larger than usual and, like the Game Gear games, have certain areas that can only be accessed with the use of particular abilities. "We wanted to try something new, and we thought it would be more refreshing, less complicated," Ben explains. "But it turns out it was more complicated to make a game that is a platformer, an action game, and kind of a Metroidvania game. So it started simple, but it kind of snowballed."

The visuals look quite unlike anything seen in the series before, with a hand-drawn style that evokes both traditional Japanese art and a French comic style. "I think all the work that I'm doing in animation for videogames, it all sparked from *Aladdin* on the Mega Drive," Ben tells us, which goes a long way to explaining the very smooth animation. "One of my favourite things about having composed for this game was really the opportunity to get kind of crazy," says Tee, discussing the soundtrack. "I was given carte blanche to experiment and to, you know, do pretty much whatever I wanted with the music." Part of that was creating music in unfamiliar styles. "I took it upon myself to go listen to a lot of stuff and study some of the traditions. There's a stage which happens at a Japanese festival, which is a setting I unfortunately haven't had an opportunity to experience in person. But there's a lot of material online that I was able to absorb and draw from, and then use those traditional elements and blend them with electronic stuff."

But the thing that immediately stands out about this latest evolution of the series is the combat – we've been able to string together impressive combos in ways that wouldn't have been possible in past games. "Combat was the main focus, because this is the thing you're going to do the most, especially if you're a ninja and you're fighting enemies, and intuitively we understood that we needed to gratify the player," says Ben. Achieving "the feeling of really playing a ninja and feeling like one" was key for Sacha Szymoniak, producer at Lizardcube. "There are not that many platform action games nowadays that gave me the feeling that our game can actually transmit," he says, before reassuring players that enjoy tackling the environment as much as enemies. "We do have quite a few platform challenges. It's not the core experience of the game, we have put much more focus on combat, but platformer players won't be disappointed."

> "WE TRIED TO LOOK AT ALL THE DIFFERENT GAMES THAT HAVE BEEN MADE FOR SHINOBI AND TRIED TO INCORPORATE WHAT WE THOUGHT WOULD FIT THE MOST"
> **BEN FIQUET**

Having played *Shinobi: Art Of Vengeance*, we're confident that the series is in good hands, and it's fascinating to see that there is still plenty of room for the games to change and evolve. The *Shinobi* series has been rather more stealthy in recent years than Joe Musashi has usually been himself, but we're hoping that it won't retreat into the shadows after this latest revival – it's far too good to stay hidden. ✱

» [PlayStation 2] Aerial combat is a big deal in *Nightshade*, and must be mastered if the game is to be completed.

» [PlayStation 2] This stage in *Nightshade* takes place on the back of a speeding jet. Cool, right?

» [3DS] That's probably just a bit warmer than Jiro would like it to be, we imagine.

» [PlayStation 5] Look at that combo – 124 hits and we're still not finished.

» [PlayStation 5] That red aura shows that Joe's getting ready to pull off an execution or three in *Art Of Vengeance*.

STAGES OF EVOLUTION

NOTABLE SPIN-OFFS

THE SHINOBI GAMES THAT DON'T QUITE FIT INTO THE FAMILY TREE

ALEX KIDD IN SHINOBI WORLD

■ Initially titled *Shinobi Kid* before Sega's erstwhile mascot got the starring role, this 1990 Master System spin-off drew on the stage themes and bosses from the original *Shinobi*, while incorporating the console elements such as power-ups and a life bar. It added a few of its own twists like wall jumps and the ability to launch off of lampposts. It's arguably the best *Alex Kidd* game and a fine *Shinobi* game too.

THE REVENGE OF SHINOBI

■ Released for the Game Boy Advance in 2002, this disappointing effort only shares a name with the Mega Drive classic. The game was developed by 3d6 Games and featured characters and settings that have no connection to the main series, as well as some rather unappealing pre-rendered sprites. With basic, unexciting gameplay, we advise you to treat this like a katana aimed at your face and avoid it.

SHINOBI 2

■ This oddity is an officially licensed mobile-only game from 2011, which originated in China. Unlike its predecessor, a graphical upgrade of the original *Shinobi*, this game is wholly original and features a brand-new cast of characters. Unfortunately, while it looks rather attractive in still shots and the idea of swapping between elemental swords is interesting, poor controls reduce it to little more than a curio.

CELEBRATING THE AMIGA

IN 1985, COMMODORE LAUNCHED A POWERHOUSE 16-BIT COMPUTER PLATFORM THAT WAS AHEAD OF ITS TIME, AND HOSTED MANY ALL-TIME CLASSIC GAMES. FORTY YEARS ON, WE SPEAK TO DEVELOPERS AND FANS TO CELEBRATE A FAMILY OF COMPUTERS THAT HAS BECOME SIMPLY TIMELESS

WORDS BY GRAHAM PEMBREY AND NICK THORPE

When the Amiga arrived in the mid-Eighties, it was a real generational leap, a platform that seemed to offer just about everything a computer user could possibly want. Commodore's 16-bit hardware offered a sophisticated desktop environment, and its multimedia capabilities made for graphical and audio packages that aided many an owner's creative ambitions. But of course, we're here for the games, and the powerful custom hardware of the Amiga opened up new possibilities for developers. The audiovisual capabilities of the machine allowed for arcade conversions and similarly styled games with detailed, colourful graphics and rich sounds that had never been possible in the home before, while the raw computing grunt allowed for greater depth and more detailed simulations in the slower-paced, more thoughtful games that have typically been the preserve of computers.

Although sales started slowly, the introduction of the Amiga 500 in 1987 was a shrewd move. This model was seen as a natural successor to the home computers that had dominated the European gaming scene in the Eighties, and became a top games machine in the region. Players felt right at home as part of the Amiga clan, often staying connected through magazines that fostered their own communities around the shared joy of gaming. However, the openness of the platform created a culture around the computer that went as deep as you wanted it to. If you wanted to flex your programming muscles and push the hardware to its limits, the demoscene beckoned, and those who fancied themselves game designers could submit their works to public domain software libraries. In fact, quite a few developers got their start in the industry by following those paths.

Commodore refreshed the platform in the early Nineties with the new Advanced Graphics Architecture, used in hardware like the Amiga 1200 and CD32. However, with IBM-compatible PCs becoming increasingly dominant in the computer market and dedicated consoles on the rise in the world of gaming, the Amiga faced pressure on two fronts and declining sales as a result. Commodore ultimately found itself squeezed out of the market and went bankrupt in 1994, with Escom picking up the line and following its predecessor into bankruptcy in 1996. However, the Amiga story is far from being over thanks to the uncommon passion of the platform's fans. For decades now, they have kept the flame alive with fan sites, magazines, new games and even new hardware projects, ensuring that it's still a great time to be an Amiga fan.

This landmark computing platform has now reached its 40th anniversary, so we're taking a big look back at the Amiga in its totality – the machines, the magazines, the memories, the modern scene and of course the games, which are the reason that we're all here to begin with. So dust off your *Batman Pack*, practice those curlers in *Sensible World Of Soccer*, put on your best Bitmap Brothers shades and get ready to celebrate a family of computers that has truly left a legacy that stands the test of time. ▶

ANDREAS TADIC
Game designer, Team17

ANDREW BRAYBROOK
Game designer, Graftgold

CAM WINSTANLEY
Editor, *Amiga Power*

DAN MALONE
Artist, The Bitmap Brothers

HENNING LUDVIGSEN
Artist, Badger Punch Games

IAN STEWART
Founder, Gremlin Graphics

JOE DECUIR
Amiga hardware design team

GA

THE AMIGA

JON HARE
Founder, Sensible Software

KARI LAWLER
YouTuber, retro repairer

MARTIN EDMONDSON
Founder, Reflections

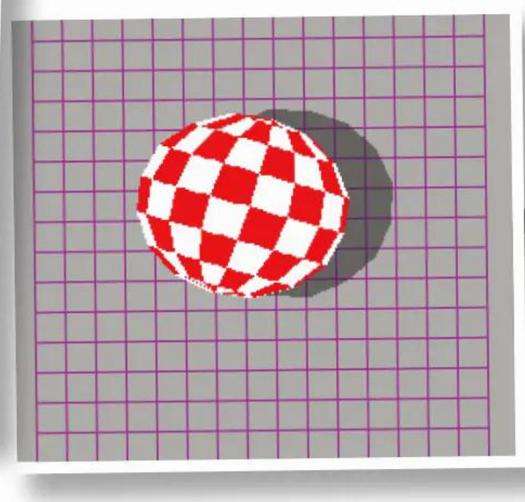
MIKE DAILLY
DMA Design legend

MURIEL TRAMIS
Game designer, Coktel Vision

SIMON PHIPPS
Game designer, Core Design

TIM WRIGHT
Composer, Psygnosis

» Inside an Amiga 500+ with its Enhanced Chipset, which improved the Original Chipset.



» Designed in 1984, this famous *Boing Ball* demo was created by RJ Mical and Dale Luck.

» A peek inside the CD32, Amiga's 32-bit games console.

THE HARDWARE

BETWEEN 1985 AND 1994, COMMODORE LAUNCHED AN ABUNDANCE OF AMIGA MODELS FEATURING CONSTANTLY EVOLVING TECHNOLOGY. THESE INNOVATIVE MACHINES – PARTICULARLY THE ICONIC AMIGA 500 – REACHED MILLIONS OF HOUSEHOLDS AROUND THE WORLD, HAVING A SEISMIC IMPACT ON THE HOME-COMPUTING LANDSCAPE

In a back room at the 1984 Consumer Electronics Show in Chicago, an early prototype of an Amiga was unveiled for the first time – and jaws duly dropped. It was "the most amazing graphics and sound machine that will ever have been offered to the consumer market", swooned *Creative Computing* journalist John Anderson a few months after the event. "Just what kind of technical foundation does Amiga have?" his glowing news report continued. "Well the VLSI chipset was designed by Jay Miner, the man who designed the super chipset of the original Atari machines."

Indeed, Jay Miner had strong form by this point. The talented hardware engineer had left Atari with an auteur reputation, and an ambition to create a powerful computer using the new Motorola 68000 microprocessor. Among those joining him on this noble quest was Amiga cofounder David Morse, who had previously headed up marketing for Tonka Toys – a career background that reflected the aim to make the Amiga a machine people would play, and not just use for practical means. Also on board was hardware engineer Joe Decuir, who had previously helped craft both the Atari 2600 and Atari 8-bit technology. "I was hired by Atari in 1975 to work on what became the 2600," Joe tells us, adding, "I chose that job to be mentored by Jay Miner." Joe clearly remembers a gaming focus being part of the early plan. "Dave Morse's original vision for the Amiga was to render cartoons in real-time," he recalls. "For the first two years, we were focussed on a games console that could also be a personal computer. Commodore changed the focus to a personal computer."

Ultimately the platform would provide for both gamers and those looking for a functional home computer, although you might not have known it from Commodore's early, practical-application-focused adverts. The first model released in 1985 was originally marketed as simply The Amiga, before becoming better known by its formal title of the Amiga 1000. With a 16/32-bit central processing unit clocked at over 7MHz, it was an impressively powerful machine. It offered a mouse-driven, multitasking graphical user interface, in the form of AmigaOS, that was far ahead of its time. Beneath the hood lay three custom chips dubbed Agnus, Denise and Paula. From these chips, game designers would eventually come to extract all kinds of technical wizardry, including the parallax scrolling in *Shadow Of The Beast* and the glorious, multi-layered soundtrack of *Turrican 2: The Final Fight*.

HARDWARE TIMELINE

A1000

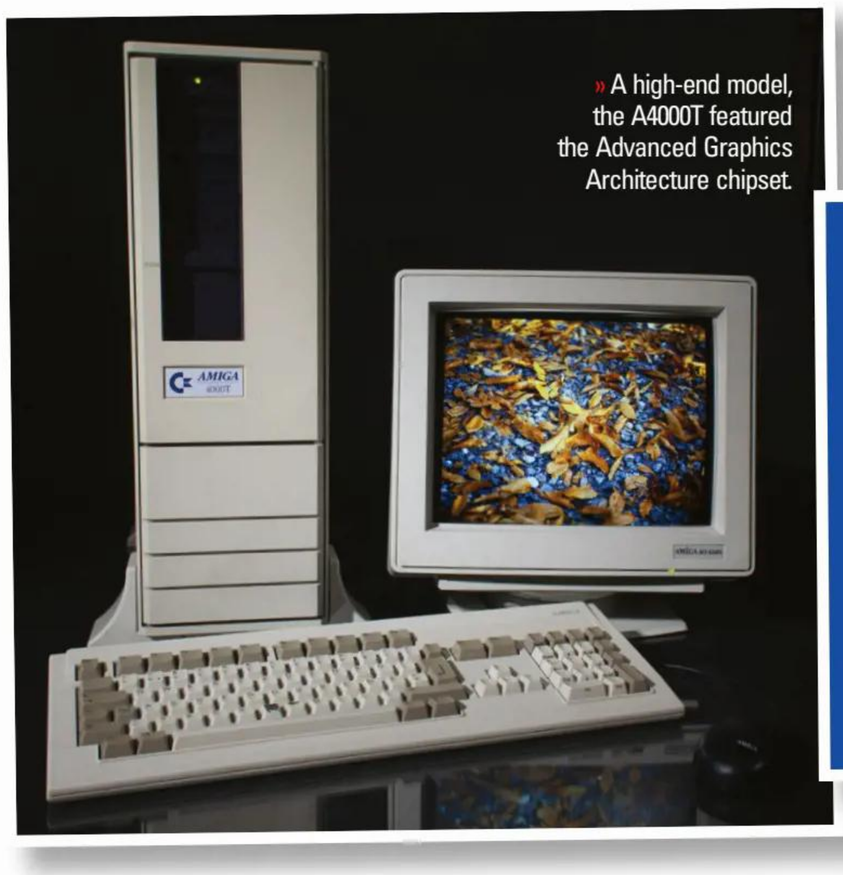
■ The original 1985 Amiga model has the names of the designers (and a paw print from Jay Miner's dog) embossed inside every case, such was the pride in its creation. The 256KB of chip RAM was expandable to 512KB using an expansion slot.

A500

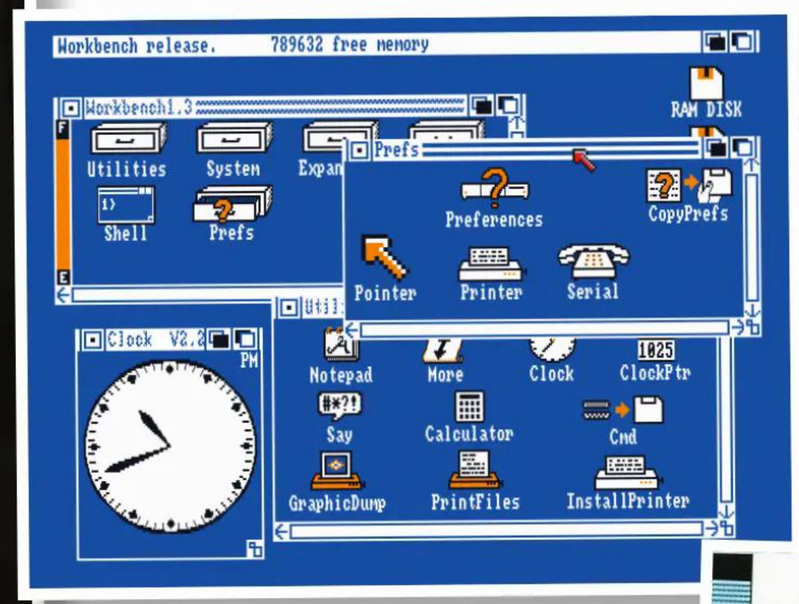
■ A more compact and affordable iteration of the A1000, the A500 was released in 1987 and became the most successful model. It was followed by the A500+ in 1991 which boosted the built-in chip RAM from 512KB to 1MB (further expandable to 2MB).

CDTV

■ In 1991, Commodore targeted the same 'all-in-one multimedia machine' market as the Philips CD-i, with the CDTV (Commodore Dynamic Total Vision). Housed in a sleek black case, it was fundamentally the A500 with a CD drive. Sales faltered, making it highly collectible today.



» A high-end model, the A4000T featured the Advanced Graphics Architecture chipset.



» The Amiga did multitasking years before it became commonplace on computers.

» *State Of The Art*, by the Norwegian demoscene group Spaceballs, was an incredible demo.

Amiga under $2,000.
Anybody else up to $20,000.
This "painting" was created on the Amiga™ computer using Electronic Arts' Deluxe Paint™ software. No PC, anywhere, can create this kind of graphic dazzle for the price of an Amiga.
But there's more to the Amiga than whiz bang graphics. It's also a top-of-the-line PC ready to solve problems, business and personal.
The incredible power that brings Tut back to life can also make gigantic spreadsheets sit up and beg, can make eloquent the word-iest of word-processing tasks, and thanks to the Amiga's unique multi-tasking capabilities, it can do
word processing and spreadsheet analysis and graphics and more simultaneously.
No other PC past, present or in the near future has done it, is doing it or is likely to do it.
AMIGA
See what you think.
™Amiga is a trademark of Commodore-Amiga, Inc. ™Deluxe Paint is a trademark of Electronic Arts, Inc.
© 1986, Commodore Electronics Limited

» This 1986 advert for the Amiga 1000 used Deluxe Paint as a selling point.

Among those custom chips, the Agnus was the gatekeeper, controlling overall access to RAM from both the central processing unit and the other chips. "I helped design the Agnus on paper using huge E-sized drawings," Joe recounts. He adds, "The most interesting thing about the Agnus was the Blitter, which I worked on with Ron Nicholson, who had worked on the original Mac at Apple. He knew the software techniques. We accelerated them in hardware." Among other things, the Blitter enabled memory blocks to be copied quickly, facilitating fast graphics. Another element of the Agnus chip was the Copper, which can manipulate video settings and create dazzling visual effects like raster lines. The Denise chip mainly looks after video output, while Paula does the same for sound and peripherals. Speaking of sound, Joe tells us that, "I also designed the four-channel audio system," which was a dream come true for Amiga musicians as it allowed them to layer and intertwine multiple tracks of audio.

While the A1000 was quietly revolutionary, it was also expensive and a relatively niche purchase for consumers. It wasn't until the iconic A500 launched in 1987 that the Amiga could be found in general retail stores, and then sales truly soared. Based on the same core hardware as the A1000 but in a smaller case with an integrated keyboard, it became even more enticing a year after release, when its price point dropped from £499 to £399 in the UK. With the standard grey 'tank mouse' included, gamers would pair this with joysticks like the Competition Pro or the Zipstick to enjoy the wealth of games that started to become available.

As Amiga models progressed, an Enhanced Chipset (found in models like the A500+, the A600 and the A3000) and then the Advanced Graphics Architecture chipset (found in the Amiga 1200 and the CD32) enabled more powerful games. Meanwhile, big box models like the Amiga 2000 and the Amiga 4000 served audiences after something high-end. Market conditions became more challenging, but the quality of the original technology is demonstrated by the passionate Amiga hardware scene that still exists today.

LOOKING BACK AT THE MAINSTREAM AMIGA MODELS

A600

■ Similar to the A500+, but contained within the smallest case yet, the A600 was a compact addition to the Amiga family that added a port for external hard drives. Like the A500+, it boasted the Enhanced Chipset, the second evolution of the original chipset.

A1200

■ This was a leap forward in power. The A1200 featured a 32-bit Motorola 68EC020 CPU, the Advanced Graphics Architecture chipset and a palette of more than 16 million colours. By this point at the end of 1992 though, more powerful PC hardware was dominating.

CD32

■ "To be this good will take Sega ages," read a cheeky billboard placed by Commodore outside the Sega UK headquarters, heralding the Amiga CD32. The September 1993 console was dedicated to gaming, but couldn't turn around Commodore's financial misfortunes.

THE GAMES

FROM RAPID RUN-AND-GUN GREATS TO THOUGHTFUL STRATEGY GEMS, THE AMIGA WAS A VERSATILE GAMING SYSTEM THAT OFFERED SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE. WE LOOK BACK ON WHERE IT EXCELLED AS A GAMES MACHINE, PLUS HOW IT COPED WITH ARCADE CONVERSIONS AND COMPETING WITH CONSOLES

Nothing could quite beat the excitement of hearing that familiar whirring-clicking sound, as the Amiga drive head moved across the tracks of a floppy disk, while a brand-new game loaded. And what a selection of games there were. Some of those games, like *Lemmings*, *Sensible Soccer*, *The Secret Of Monkey Island* and *Shadow Of The Beast*, would go on to be considered classics.

For *Shadow Of The Beast* creator Martin Edmondson, as with others who had a background programming 8-bit machines in their bedrooms, the Amiga represented "an incredible leap forward", he tells us. "The obvious changes were vastly more memory, higher resolution, far greater colour bit-depth, general programmability and flexibility, and most importantly perhaps, heaps of custom arcade-style hardware." One example Martin gives is the ability to have multiple overlaid playfields, so that an entire game screen could be imposed onto another and scrolled or moved independently. "That was critical to *Shadow Of The Beast*, as it allowed trees and so on to scroll over background mountains. And in *Awesome* we used it when the player wandered around the planet surfaces and you could see through the structure to the surface below."

As well as adapting the hardware to their needs, Amiga developers also excelled at using their creativity, taking often left-field concepts and working them into gaming magic. Take *Wizkid* with its block-munching chaos, the colourful platforming of *Putty*, the unique future-sports action of *Speedball 2*, the insect-based shoot-'em-up chaos of *Apidya* and the movie-like atmosphere of Cinemaware classics such as *Defender Of The Crown* and *It Came From The Desert*. It often felt like there was a free-wheeling, anarchic attitude running through these native Amiga games, in some cases fostered by programmers' beginnings in the vibrant Amiga demoscene.

"The demoscene was always a close community of technically brilliant people," Martin reflects. "There was always lots of excitement around what the demos could do visually, showing off their programming and art skills and maximising the hardware. The Amiga was ideal for this as the hardware and graphic capabilities were powerful but also incredibly open-ended and flexible to the ingenious programmer." Games like *Pinball Dreams*, *Lionheart* and *Full Contact* were able to stun players in part thanks to the techniques their makers had acquired from the demoscene.

Martin points out that "most of the unique hardware on the Amiga was designed for arcade-style gaming effects", and as you'd expect, conversions of popular arcade games were also a huge deal on the platform. Andrew Braybook's masterful adaptation of *Rainbow Islands* was one of the biggest success stories on this front, attaining the top spot in *Amiga Power*'s top 100 games list in both 1991 and 1992. *The NewZealand Story*, *Midnight Resistance* and *Silkworm* were other successful examples of arcade hits playing brilliantly. On the other hand, there were also middling coin-op conversions such as *Final Fight*, and some such as *Out Run* that weren't a patch on their console counterparts. It was playing those lesser-versions of titles that sometimes got Amiga owners down when speaking with their console-owning pals. The performance of *Street Fighter II*, for example, was quite the downgrade from other platforms. Fortunately, *Mortal Kombat* and its sequel fared better, while original games like *IK+* and *Shadow Fighter* showed how fast and fluid fighting games could be on the platform.

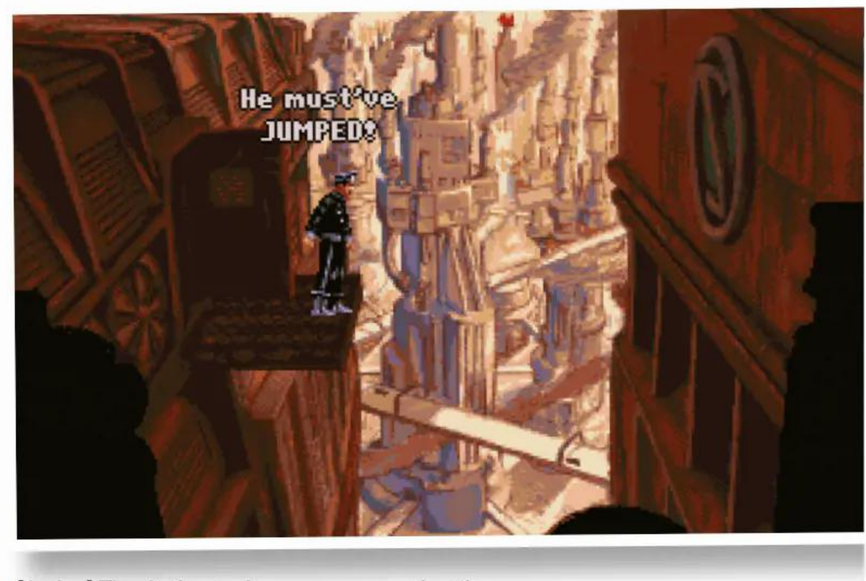
Although there was never quite a Mario or Sonic equivalent that rose the ranks to become an Amiga mascot, there were plenty of enjoyable platform games on offer. *Zool*, *Superfrog*, *James Pond* and *Chuck Rock* were prominent examples, as was Martin's *Brian The Lion*, which made great use of the A1200's Advanced Graphics Architecture chipset and the capabilities afforded by the CD32. "I was always very proud of what we achieved with *Brian The Lion* technically," Martin says. "In many ways it was more advanced than *Shadow Of The Beast* in its use of the Amiga's custom hardware. We developed a technique to cheat the Copper into rotating the screen, like the Nintendo SNES at the time, at 60fps which was something that no game had achieved before on the Amiga."

Slower-paced strategy outings like *Populous*, and *The Settlers* also had a strong place in the affections of Amiga gamers, as did point-and-click adventures. You sometimes just had to be prepared to be patient: *Beneath A Steel Sky*, for example, came on a whopping 15 floppy disks! Beyond the small snapshot given here, the breadth of genres the Amiga catered for was phenomenal. For many, like Martin, "the Amiga was an original 'wow' moment in gaming".

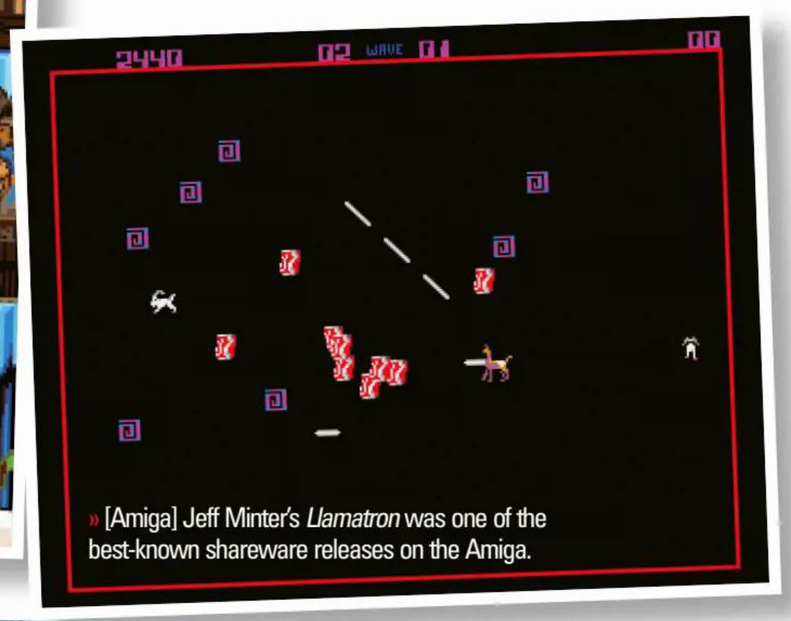
» [Amiga] Cinemaware games like *Defender Of The Crown* impressed thanks to their impressive visuals and movie-like themes.

» [Amiga] The parallax scrolling of *Shadow Of The Beast* looked stunning in 1989.

» [Amiga] Andrew Braybrook designed this excellent conversion of Taito's *Rainbow Islands*.

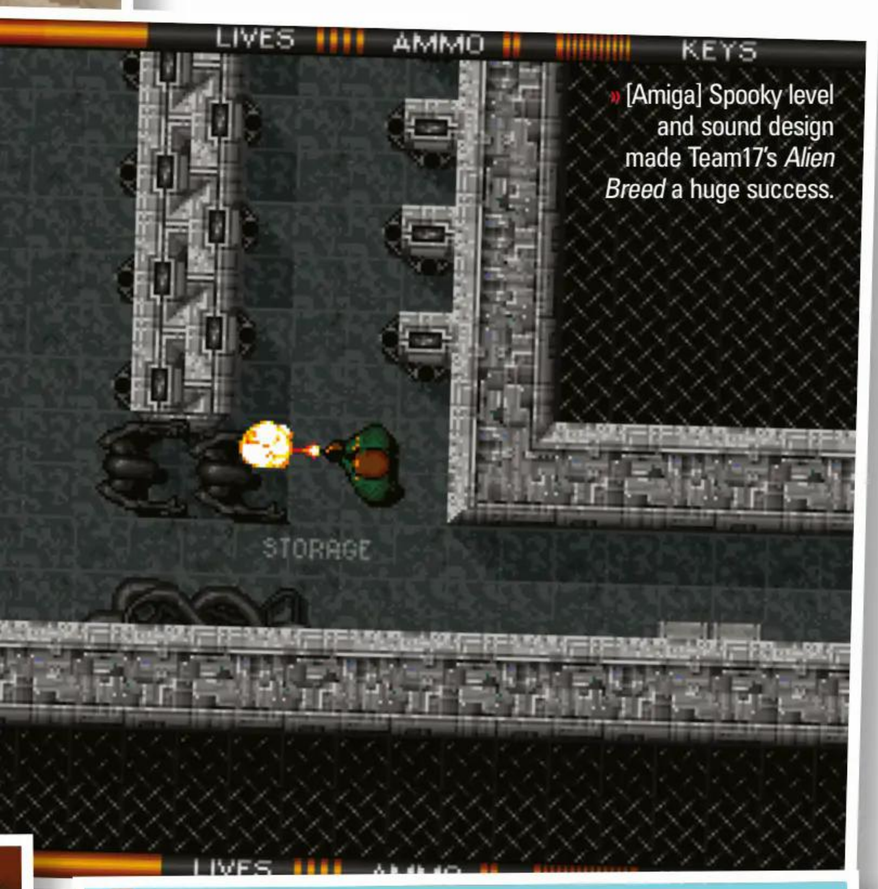


» [Amiga] The Amiga tank mouse was perfect for point-and-click games like *Beneath A Steel Sky*.



» [Amiga] Jeff Minter's *Llamatron* was one of the best-known shareware releases on the Amiga.

» [Amiga] *Speedball 2: Brutal Deluxe* was one of many great Amiga games The Bitmap Brothers created.



» [Amiga] Spooky level and sound design made Team17's *Alien Breed* a huge success.

» [Amiga] Martin feels AGA game *Brian The Lion* worked the Amiga even harder than his earlier game *Shadow Of The Beast*.

BRILLIANT BUNDLES

REVISITING FOUR MEMORABLE AMIGA RETAIL PACKS

BATMAN PACK

■ Tim Burton's *Batman* film was everywhere in 1989. What better way to sell tonnes of Amiga 500s than to ride that wave? The *Batman Pack* contained Ocean's excellent *Batman*, plus *The NewZealand Story*, flight simulator *F/A-18 Interceptor* and Deluxe Paint II.

SCREEN GEMS

■ Continuing with the silver-screen theme, this pack brought together *Back To The Future II*, *Night Breed* and *Days Of Thunder*. Deluxe Paint II made a return, while *Shadow Of The Beast II* had nothing to do with Hollywood but fitted with the theme by being visually striking.

CARTOON CLASSICS

■ This was another savvy combination orchestrated by Commodore UK managing director David Pleasance. It combined the Amiga 500+ with TV tie-ins *The Simpsons: Bart Vs The Space Mutants* and *Captain Planet*, plus *Lemmings* and Deluxe Paint III. It was released at the tempting price of £359.

Commodore
CAPTAIN PLANET AND THE PLANETEERS
CARTOON CLASSICS
Lemmings
THE SIMPSONS BART VS THE SPACE MUTANTS
DPAINT III
ELECTRONIC ARTS
The exciting world of graphics, animation and sound is at your fingertips with the Amiga 500.
Cartoon Classics brings together a fantastic selection of Cartoon Games and a Paint Package to create your own cartoons.
Complete with 1 Megabyte of RAM and TV Modulator.
European Computer of the Year '90 & '91

AMIGA 1200
COMIC RELIEF PACK
AMIGA 1200
from Commodore
The World's Best Selling 32-Bit Home Computer
2Mb 32-Bit RAM fully expandable
New internal "engine" – the AA chipset
Capable of 256,000 colours on-screen from a 16.7 million palette
Complete with built-in modulator
Plus stereo sound
One year "AT HOME" service (UK only)
Mouse
Pack Includes
SLEEPWALKER
"the red nose game"

COMIC RELIEF

■ One of three Amiga 1200 bundles, the *Comic Relief Pack* was a tie-in with the charity event Red Nose Day. Uniquely among Amiga bundles, it only featured one game: the enjoyable platform-puzzler *Sleepwalker*. The new 32-bit hardware included was the main draw.

Image credit: Vasilis Psomiadis (amigaposters.github.io).

THE KILLER APPS

THERE ARE SOME GAMES THAT JUST MAKE SYSTEMS SING, DEFINING GENRES AND SETTING UP THEIR DEVELOPERS FOR FUTURE SUCCESS. HERE ARE OUR PICKS FOR TEN GAMES THAT REPRESENT THE ABSOLUTE CREAM OF THE CROP FROM THE AMIGA'S VAST LIBRARY

POPULOUS

BULLFROG PRODUCTIONS ▪ 1989

■ Bullfrog blessed the Amiga with fine games including *Syndicate*, *Theme Park* and *Powermonger*, but it all started here. *Populous* tasks you with growing your civilisation via both direct and indirect interventions, with the goal of triumph over a rival civilisation. No other game did as much to popularise the god game genre.

LEMMINGS

DMA DESIGN ▪ 1991

■ Tiny little creatures walk to their death, unless you assign them jobs that can help them overcome the threats. This simple premise proved enormously popular, and though it spread to almost every viable platform, the Amiga is where it feels most at home. Today, DMA Design is *GTA* developer Rockstar North.

LIONHEART

THALION ▪ 1993

■ Few Amiga games look quite as beautiful as this platformer, but then Thalion always did set out to make spectacular-looking games, and Henk Nieborg's art is legendary. It's more than just a pretty game though, as it has enough variety and challenge to keep you going for quite some time.

ANOTHER WORLD

DELPHINE SOFTWARE ▪ 1991

■ There weren't many games that could be considered cinematic in the early Nineties, but Éric Chahi's platform adventure was definitely one of them thanks to its detailed cutscenes. Lester's inadvertent trip to an alien world is still enormously atmospheric, and set the stage for modern games like *Inside* and *Limbo*.

FORMULA ONE GRAND PRIX

MICROPROSE ▪ 1991

■ The first in Geoff Crammond's series of racing simulators was a true technical marvel. At a time when even arcades rarely hosted true 3D games, it was incredible to see polygonal cars and tracks at home, and they gave the game a sense of realism that other racers just couldn't match.

THE CHAOS ENGINE

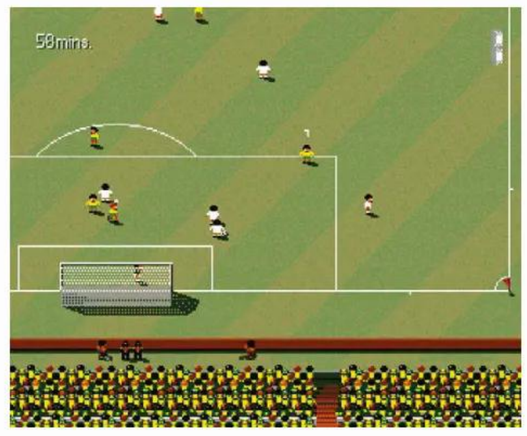
THE BITMAP BROTHERS ▪ 1993

■ Britain's coolest developers could be relied upon for some great Amiga games, and this steampunk run-and-gun is one of their very greatest. Co-op play is great, but if you're playing solo the CPU can control one of the six characters to aid you against the mutated monstrosities of Victorian England.

THE SECRET OF MONKEY ISLAND

LUCASFILM GAMES ▪ 1991

■ Guybrush Threepwood's first foray into point-and-click pirate adventures may not have been developed for the Amiga first, but this version is undoubtedly the one that many of you played back in the day. It was one of the first truly funny computer games, and had a perfectly pitched difficulty level.



SENSIBLE WORLD OF SOCCER

SENSIBLE SOFTWARE ▪ 1994

■ Is this the best sports game ever? It could just be. Taking the sublime gameplay of *Sensible Soccer* as a base, the developers attempted to make the most comprehensive game possible – hundreds of teams, thousands of players, and a management mode that kept many players totally hooked to their Amigas.

PINBALL DREAMS

DIGITAL ILLUSIONS ▪ 1992

■ Not only was this the first really great Amiga pinball game, but it was the work of a group of friends from the Amiga demoscene. The game's success resulted in plenty of conversions and some sequels, while the studio still exists today as DICE and is best known for the *Battlefield* series.

WORMS: THE DIRECTOR'S CUT

Team17 ▪ 1997

■ The classic artillery game had brought Team17 success on many platforms, but the company had always been a stalwart of the Amiga scene. This late release was its goodbye gift to the community, an ultimate version that wasn't available anywhere else, which delivered new weapons and features. ▶

Q&A MIKE DAILLY

THE DMA DESIGN LEGEND ON MAKING AMIGA GAMES

Can you recall your first experience with Commodore's Amiga?
I got my A500 in 1990 – a *Batman Pack*, so there were a lot of good games out for it already. Having seen [DMA founder] Dave Jones toy with it for a while beforehand, I had a fairly good idea what it was able to do. I actually started on the Atari ST first which let me mess around with 68000. So when I finally got an Amiga, I was able to jump right in. The Amiga hardware was great fun, incredibly flexible, and the Copper was amazing. After coding on the ST, the Amiga had a lot more toys to play with and I loved tinkering with it.

***Lemmings* was a huge deal for the Amiga. What are your main memories of making it?**
I remember making the animation that spawned it pretty clearly. After an argument with Scott Johnston about the size of *Walker* characters, I took a stab at making them as small as I could. After showing the guys and having that eureka moment, Gary Timmons touched it up and made it the usable sprite we all came to know and love. Making the game itself was great fun. Once Dave got the editor up and running, we got down to making really fun, challenging levels, and we all had a blast.

Did you realise what a huge success *Lemmings* would turn out to be?
No. You never do. Each game we did we enjoyed doing, but you never know how well they'll be received. *Lemmings*' huge success was a total shock, and it just kept going. We loved the game and the characters, so doing more and more with them was just fine by us.

Did *Lemmings* being part of the *Cartoon Classics* pack help it gain exposure?
What it did do, was bring in the money. From what I remember, it was a tiny royalty, but the volume more than made up for it. The *Cartoon Classics* pack came at the start of the Amiga boom, and DMA profited from it. We were able to move to larger offices, and were suddenly taken more seriously by business people. This money funded DMA's growth for years.

You eventually went on to make *Grand Theft Auto*. Was a version of that game ever considered for the later Amiga models?
No, we'd put the Amiga aside as it was clear it was in decline. At the time, we were looking at consoles and PCs. We'd just signed with Nintendo to be part of the 'dream team', and we were also looking at the PlayStation and PC. With all this new tech about to shake up the games industry, the Amiga looked positively decrepit compared to that.

What are your thoughts on the modern Amiga scene? Does it impress you?
I love the current Amiga scene, and the new tech and new games constantly being made for it. For many it was the peak of their childhood gaming, so it's only natural that it'd be a strong part of the scene. The new games-and-demo scene is incredibly active, and it's an especially simple platform to get involved with. There's cheap FPGA replicas, A500s are plentiful, and Amiga emulation is very mature. This makes development simple and rapid. Music is also still a big thing on the Amiga. All in all, the scene is almost as active as it was 30 years ago.

THE MAGAZINES

AMIGA OWNERS WERE SPOILT FOR CHOICE WHEN IT CAME TO MAGAZINES DEDICATED TO THEIR PLATFORM. STANDING OUT AMONG THESE WAS THE MUCH-LOVED AMIGA POWER. FORMER EDITOR CAM WINSTANLEY TAKES US BACK THROUGH THE RAUCOUS MAGAZINE SCENE OF THE TIME

In its own anarchic way, *Amiga Power* offered a kind of community service for its young readership. "In a pre-internet world, we fulfilled the needs that people have on social media," reflects the magazine's former editor Cam Winstanley. "There were four or five pages of letters, and what we then called in-jokes but you would now call memes. We created our own vocabulary. You were part of a gang if you were an *Amiga Power* reader."

Of course, if you weren't part of that gang, there were others you could join too. For those who had been tempted over from the Commodore 64 crowd, they could simply keep reading *Zzap!64*, which started covering Amiga games from 1988. Then there was *Amiga Format* which balanced technical coverage with gaming and had an impressive innings, lasting from 1989 right up until 2000 – making it the longest lasting and best-selling Amiga magazine. *CU Amiga*, *The One Amiga* and *Amiga Action* were meanwhile all purely devoted to play. The coverdisks attached to them contained generous demos of new games, often alongside eccentric public domain indie releases and sometimes full free applications too.

» *Amiga Power* covers showcased big name games and special features like its annual top 100.

» Cam Winstanley says the *Amiga Power* crew saw *The One Amiga* as close rivals.

Among these competing publications, *Amiga Power* carved an impressive niche with its laser-sharp writing, irreverent tone and carefree humour. Was it as chaotically enjoyable behind the scenes as we readers imagined? "It was ridiculously good fun," Cam confirms. In part, he recalls, this was to do with the magazine operating from a building above a post room, set back from the main Future Publishing office in Bath. "That meant *Amiga Power* was physically removed from anyone's oversight. It was barely an office: it was basically just a room in a Georgian house, probably sixteen square feet, with nine or ten people crammed in. Most of the time nobody else came there, so we could do what we wanted. We'd all turn up and work hard – we wouldn't take the piss – but it was very laid back because it was very easy for Future to see that we were getting the job done and selling lots of copies. If we wanted to do a photoshoot and dress up as *Reservoir Dogs*, nobody would ever tell us not to."

Amiga Power lived up to its tagline "a magazine with attitude" impeccably. "Obviously it was part of the magazine that we were always right," laughs Cam. "A lot of that was just our shtick, but also, as far as we were concerned, where we went other people followed. Quite often we would do features and then other magazines would copy the format. Where did we see ourselves against *Amiga Action* and *The One*? *The One* was a close rival, but not as good as us, and *Amiga Action* we were entirely dismissive of. We had a plagiarism case against *Amiga Action*, where they published four reviews I'd written, almost word for word (although to be

MODEM MANIA

HOW PEOPLE MADE BFFS ON THE BBS

While magazines kept Amiga fans connected through printed means, bulletin board systems (BBS) did something similar online. In the years before the modern internet, Amiga users who connected to a BBS through a dial-up modem and a terminal programme could share files and exchange messages. The number of users that could connect simultaneously depended on the number of phone lines the host had connected, which in many cases was only one.

As well as the obscure usernames, like-minded discussions and file sharing, there were also 'door games' – minimalist, text-based games like the 1989 RPG *Legend Of The Red Dragon*. Door games often involved interacting with other users, and as such they were a simple precursor to online multiplayer gaming. For demoscene coders, artists and musicians devoted to making impressive audiovisual showcases, making connections through a BBS was also game-changing. It allowed international collaboration and reduced the need to send floppy disks by snail mail.

Nostalgia for the simple joys of connecting to a BBS has driven a resurgence in recent years. Amiga refurbisher Retro32 started a new BBS in 2023, for example, and you can find a directory of other active BBS at 8bitboyz.com

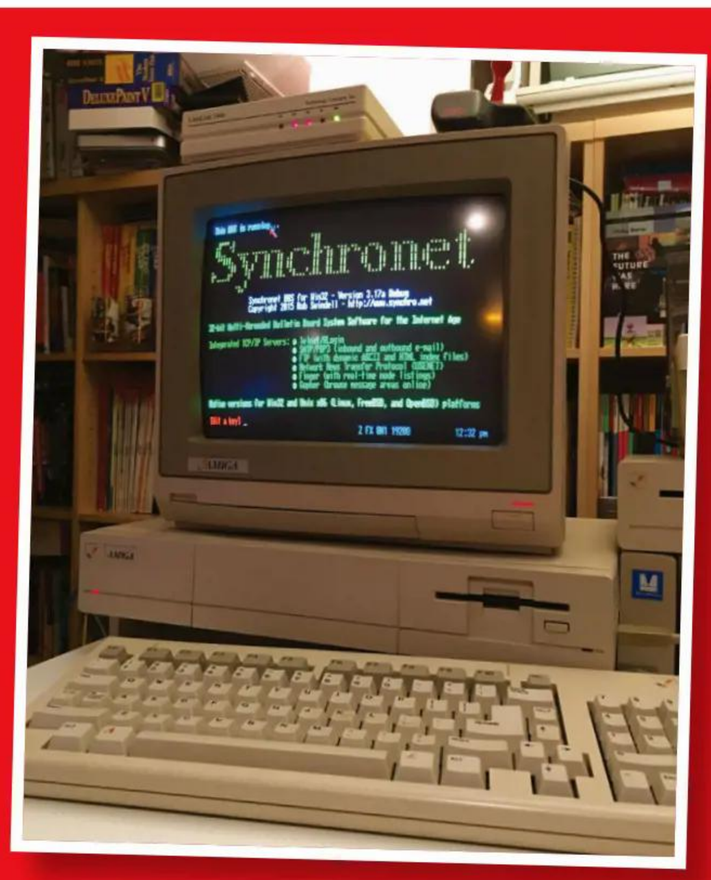


Image credit: Blake Patterson (http://bit.ly/3t289vo)

BRITAIN'S BIGGEST AND BEST-SELLING AMIGA MAGAZINE
AMIGA FORMAT
ISSUE 20 ■ MARCH 1991 ■ £2.95
IF ONLY THERE WAS SOMEONE WHO COULD TELL ME WHICH SOFTWARE TO BUY!
GET THE ANSWERS
WITH OUR NO-NONSENSE GUIDE TO WHAT TO BUY AND WHAT TO STEAL IN: GRAPHICS, WORD PROCESSORS, DTP, MUSIC, VIDEO, FINANCE, SPREADSHEETS AND DATABASES
NO COVERDISK?
THEN ASK FOR ONE FROM YOUR NEWSAGENT
NEWEST GAMES! MIG 29, Team Suzuki, Lemmings! ATTACK OF THE SEQUELS: Speedball 2, Gazza 2, Turrican 2 FIRST REVIEWS: HAM animation with Spectracolour, Disney Animation Studio, DTP heavyweights Professional Page 2 and Pagestream 2
Hints, tips and advice galore
Workbench p183
Gamebusters p95
Beginners p173

» *Amiga Format* was the longest-running Amiga magazine, stretching from 1989 to 2000.

» [Amiga] Some developers created tailored minigames for magazines, like this *Cannon Soccer* special for *Amiga Format*.

» The 1985 debut cover of *Amiga World*, a long-standing favourite in the US.

fair to them, it was a freelancer and the magazine hadn't realised). There was never any doubt that we were the best."

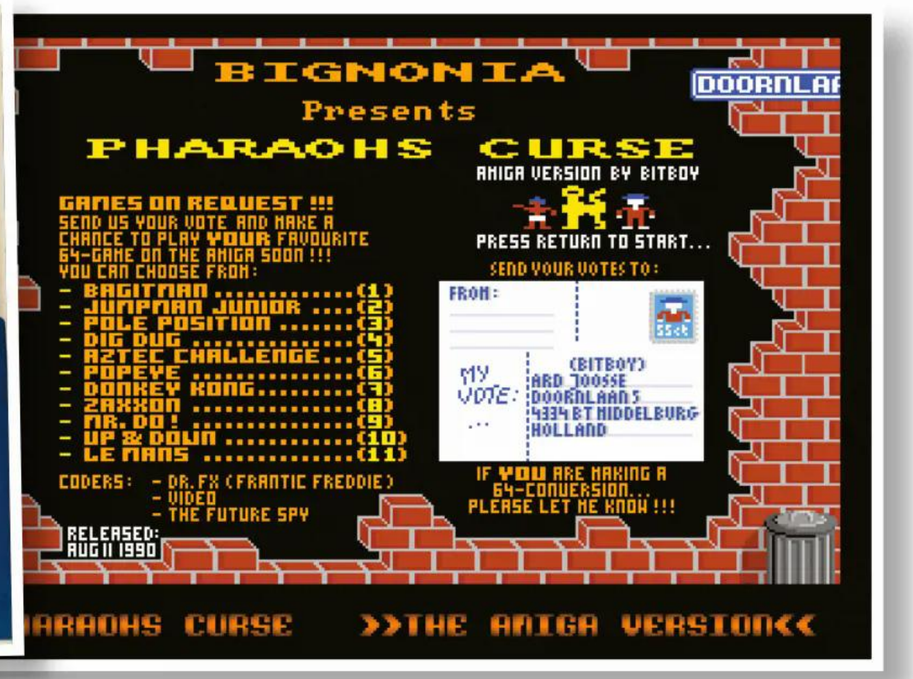
Part of the ethos of the magazine was using the full breadth of possible review scores, which didn't always go down brilliantly with advertisers. "How weird that we even had to point that out: that an average game should get 50%," Cam reasons. "But that was unheard of. Famously the score of death is 73%; it's just low enough to tell readers not to buy the game, but high enough not to piss off the advertisers." On one occasion there was the national press to contend with too, as *Amiga Power* became embroiled in the brief media furore about *Cannon Fodder* and its remembrance poppy artwork. "I was in the room when a *Daily Star* reporter and photographer burst in," Cam recalls. "They'd somehow got into the building and barged in yelling, 'How do you respond to this?' We were shutting the door on them and they were shouting. It was a storm in a teacup."

Cam recalls plenty of lighter times, like getting to know the likes of David Braben, Jeff Minter and Sensible Software, and giving writers their first break. "During my stint as editor, I took the best letter writers and gave them jobs. There was Mil Millington who became a novelist, and Kieron Gillen who was C-Monster – the funniest letter writer on *Amiga Power* – and is now a massively successful comics writer." You can tell it's a period of his career Cam looks back fondly on. "Somebody disparagingly once on the internet said *Amiga Power* was just university students trying to make secondary school students laugh," he muses. "But that's exactly what it was. I think we succeeded."

FEATURE
GO TO HELL
58
DOOM – BUT NOT ON THE AMIGA PART 2
AMIGA POWER's normally a bit 'sit-on-the-fencey' when it comes to the great graphics vs playability debate, but not on this occasion. *Doom* type games work because they look real; the greater the realism, the better.
But of course, reality's got the best graphics of all, so wouldn't a real-life *Doom* game be the game to end all games? We're not talking paintball or anything, we're talking arcade perfect *Doom*, only for real. After a blur of cardboard and sticky-backed plastic, we now present the definitive, step-by-step, easy-to-follow instructions for:
DOOM, BUT NOT ON THE COMPUTER
THE POWERS THAT GO UP
DAGGER – To "stab" your opponent's target in "hand-to-hand" combat.
SPEED – Simply sever your HinderoHike™ with this zip-packed power-up.
FIREPOWER – Because you kill more baddies faster on full auto.
AMMO – What's the point in great guns if you're out of plastic pellets?
INFRARED NIGHT VISION – Well, not quite, but this powerful torch will light your way.
EXTRA LIFE – Simply tape this over your old one to get back in tip-top condition.
1. SUIT UP
2. TOOL AND DIE
3. DON'T...
4. DO...
5. MONSTERS
6. BOSSES
7. ABOUT THAT GUN
8. GAME OVER
AMIGA POWER AUGUST 1995
59
GO TO HELL
FEATURE

» This *Amiga Power* feature pre-empted similar articles and the '*Doom* runs on anything' craze.

» Coverdisks included a mix of game demos, public domain and shareware releases.



» Coverdisks were an important outlet for public domain games like this version of *Pharaohs Curse*.

THE AMIGA TODAY

FOUR DECADES ON, THE DEDICATED AMIGA SCENE IS BUZZING. IN THE UK AND INTERNATIONALLY, THERE ARE EVENTS, COMMUNITY USER GROUPS, NEW GAMES AND HARDWARE, WEBSITES AND MAGAZINES KEEPING THE DREAM ALIVE. THE PASSION AND INNOVATION SURROUNDING THE PLATFORM SHOW NO SIGNS OF WANING

When Commodore went bankrupt in 1994, the sad decline of the Amiga seemed to have arrived. Game releases gradually fizzled out. Hardware production halted, and one by one, the magazines that had kept keen Amiga gamers informed shuttered their offices. And so it was that, for many years, the Amiga seemed to have become a thing of the past. But in reality, many enthusiasts never stopped using and modifying their machines. In recent years it's become more and more visible that the platform is alive and kicking, thanks to a passionate community of gaming fans, hardcore hardware tinkerers, software developers, podcasters and content creators who hold the Amiga close to their heart.

» [Amiga] *Roguecraft* is a delightful retro-inspired roguelike made for the Amiga.

A superb example of this community in action is *Roguecraft*, a modern Amiga game by Norwegian indie developers Badger Punch Games. An extended version of the game, *Roguecraft DX*, was recently announced as a cartridge for the Evercade range of retro consoles. Henning Ludvigsen, artist at Badger Punch who makes games with his coding colleague Ricki Sickenger, emphasises that the pair are hugely passionate about the Amiga. "The Amiga has a lovely, active and welcoming developer community," he tells us. "And the machine itself is a joy to make stuff on, so we ended up making new friends, and having a lot of fun in the process of making *Roguecraft*."

Inspired by the original *Rogue* game and Lovecraftian aesthetics, *Roguecraft* offers turn-based exploration in procedural dungeons. Available to buy as an Amiga Disk File (ADF), it can be played on emulators, or on the modern, HDMI-compatible A500 Mini console, or of course original Amiga hardware should you have any to hand. "We were certainly taken by surprise, and pretty humbled by the response from the Amiga community," Henning admits. "*Roguecraft* also won an award for best retro game back in February at the Debug Indie Game Awards, which also was shocking, considering the games we were up against."

» Kari Lawler manages to clean and restore this mouldy Amiga 600 in one of her videos.

LONG LIVE THE AMIGA

THE A500 MINI

■ While many still enjoy using original Amiga hardware, The A500 Mini by Retro Games Ltd is an excellent plug-and-play option. It emulates both the original A500 and the AGA technology of later models. There are 25 games included and more can be added.

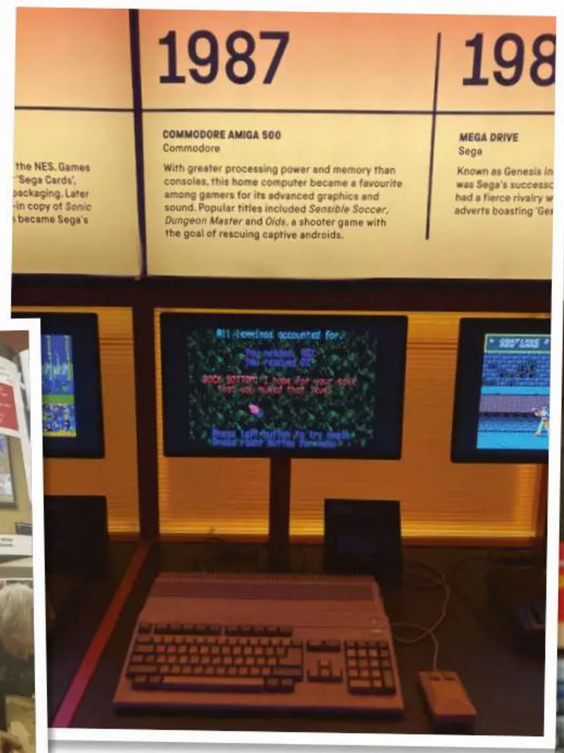
AMIGA ADDICT

■ A community-driven magazine with carefully curated content, *Amiga Addict* carries the torch for the old guard of Amiga magazines with its fun, upbeat vibe. Covering both technical hardware deep-dives and new and old Amiga games, it's well worthy of your time and support.

ZZAP! AMIGA

■ The classic *Zzap!64* magazine first started covering Amiga games in 1988, and these days there's the dedicated *Zzap! Amiga* to meet your needs. Released every two months, it has the brilliantly vibrant cover art you'd expect, plus a wealth of features, reviews, previews and news.

» You can find details of community events and user groups in *Amiga Addict*.


1987
198
COMMODORE AMIGA 500
Commodore
With greater processing power and memory than consoles, this home computer became a favourite among gamers for its advanced graphics and sound. Popular titles included *Sensible Soccer*, *Dungeon Master* and *Oids*, a shooter game with the goal of rescuing captive androids.
MEGA DRIVE
Sega

» The legacy of the Amiga being celebrated at The Science Museum in London.

» There are loads of new accessories being made for original Amiga hardware, including Immortal Joysticks.

» [Amiga] *Turbo Tomato* by Nivrig Games is another new release that made waves in recent years.

What does Henning think it is about the Amiga that inspires such devotion? "In our opinion the Amiga was the last of the home computers that felt special and that inspired the owners to be creative. With modern PCs being quite impersonal and boring, nostalgia for the Amiga seems to be everlasting among everyone who was lucky enough to grow up with one."

Fondness for the Amiga spreads beyond those who grew up with it, though – as Kari Lawler will attest. Kari's retro-computing videos have had many thousands of views on YouTube, including videos where she revisits and restores Amiga hardware. How did she become interested in the platform? "It was more of a destined progression," she tells us. "After exploring the explosion of 8-bit machines into the home from the early Eighties, I started moving further forwards in time, looking at what came next. And so my first foray began into the Amiga line of home computers." In one video she brings an A600 back from the brink, and in another she restores an A500 while also adding a Gotek drive (floppy disk emulator). "Most machines I come across need some TLC, and it's challenging and exciting for me to try and get them working again – sometimes with modern replacements, like the Gotek upgrade in my A500 video – whilst also learning how they work," she explains.

Does Kari have a favourite Amiga model? "Kind of crazy but my favourite is the CD32, the final Commodore, as I have a bit of a fondness for the more niche early Nineties CD-based consoles, like the 3DO and Philips CD-i. But more recently, my go-to model is probably the A500, due to its compatibility with most software. I've spent quite a bit of time looking at the Amiga demoscene (via Judge Drokk of Anarchy fame), loving the graphics and music, whilst also eagerly reading, like a soap opera, about the drama that often went on behind the scenes."

What do Henning and Kari think about the modern Amiga scene overall? "When it was released in 1985 the Amiga was way ahead of the curve, with its amazing graphics and sound, especially with what it brought to the table creativity-wise," reflects Kari. "It's no wonder it's still fondly remembered today, and still used and supported by so many 40 years after its release. Hopefully I can do my part to share this and carry on the legacy and historical importance of the Amiga for the next generation." Henning is similarly positive. "When we meet fellow Amiga enthusiasts today there's an instant bond which is pretty amazing, and a sure sign that the Amiga was, and still is, something very special," he says. "Amiga forever!"

SIX WAYS TO ENJOY THE AMIGA TODAY

lemon
GAMES
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Welcome to the wonderful world of Amiga!
You've just come to a website all dedicated to the classic Amiga computer. We bring the good old days back into the spotlight by providing a library of games as well as a community.
Each day thousands of nostalgics, newcomers and sceners gather here to enjoy our unique and interactive playground.
ON-SITE NEWS
International Amiga Day
May 31, 2025 by Predseda
International Amiga day is here again. Today it would be a birthday of Jay Glenn Miner (May 31, 1932 – June 20, 1994), which means we celebrate the International Amiga day. What does it mean for you? Look at the rules for this day - it is simple to join and enjoy.
Long life Amiga!
New game from Retream: Gemdalus
May 24, 2025 by Predseda

LEMON AMIGA

■ Created by Swedish Amiga and Commodore 64 fan Kim Lemon, this long-lasting website is a database of almost 5,000 Amiga games. It's packed full of details and community reviews, and you can join in by commenting and voting on your favourite releases.

EVERCADE CARTS

■ Blaze Entertainment's Evercade range now has several Amiga cartridges. There are Team17, Delphine Software and The Bitmap Brothers carts featuring classic games from those studios, plus the upcoming expanded release of *Roguecraft*, timed nicely to coincide with the Amiga turning 40.

AMIGA BOOKS

■ There are some wonderful high-quality books out there about the Amiga these days. We'd recommend *The Bitmap Brothers: Universe* from Read Only Memory, *Commodore Amiga: A Visual Compendium* from Bitmap Books and *The Story Of The Commodore Amiga In Pixels* from Fusion Retro Books.

AMIGA ME

THE AMIGA HOLDS A SPECIAL PLACE IN THE HEART OF GAMES DEVELOPERS AS WELL AS PLAYERS. WE ASKED THE PEOPLE BEHIND A VARIETY OF CLASSIC AMIGA GAMES TO SHARE THEIR THOUGHTS ON THE PLATFORM, AND WHAT IT MEANS TO THEM 40 YEARS ON

JON HARE

Sensible Software founder

"The Commodore Amiga, without doubt, facilitated the peak era of original game development and the happiest times I've experienced as a game designer and artist over the last 40 years.

In an era when new game genres and mechanics were yet to be invented, the technology jump from 8-bit machines to this was seismic and the technically stable, non-vetted nature of the Amiga as a publishing platform gave more creative game developers free rein to explore and invent like never before.

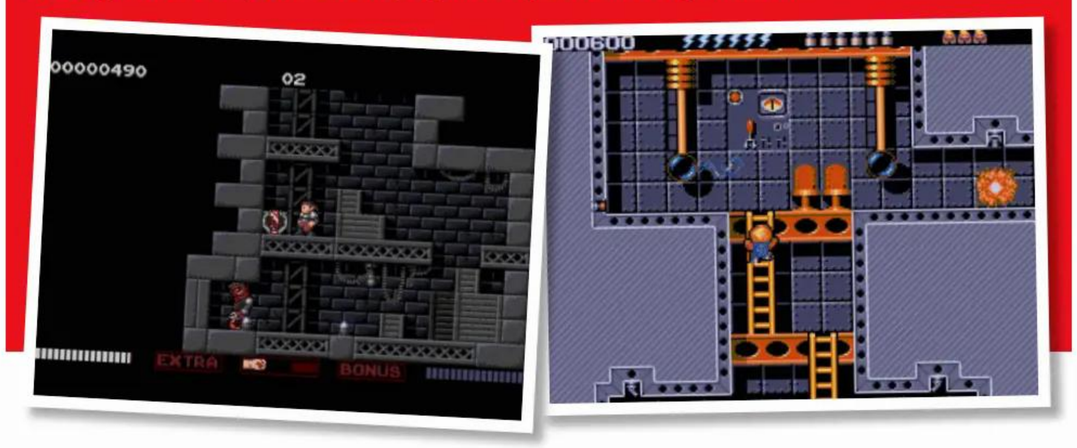
Mega-lo-Mania, *Wizkid*, *Cannon Fodder* and *Sensible World Of Soccer* owe everything to the wonderful machine they were created for."

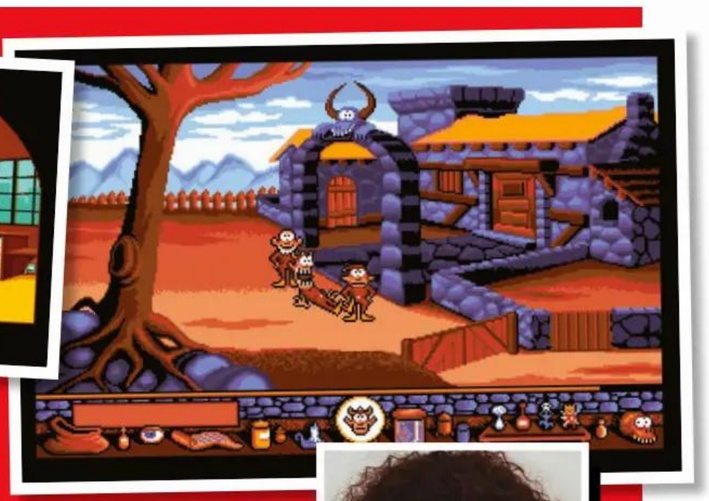
SIMON PHIPPS

Coktel Vision game designer

"Forty years. Can you believe it? The Amiga, like the Atari ST I used to code for it, wasn't just a computer; it was my canvas, a way to bring my art to life. For me, those years weren't just a job, they were an exploration. Every line of code, every pixel laid down… it was breathing life into something new. Looking back, it's wild to think – we were pioneers, pushing boundaries with limited resources, fuelled by pure creativity, forging memories for thousands of people we'd never even meet.

Games like *Rick Dangerous 1* and *2*, *Wolfchild* and *Bubba 'N' Stix* were incredibly special – the camaraderie with the guys I worked with, the sheer fun we had. And *Switchblade*? That one was entirely my own, brought to life with music by the late, legendary Ben Daglish. These creations, born from countless late nights and boundless imagination, weren't just products; they were extensions of ourselves. That era, those machines, and those creations – they'll always hold a profoundly special place in my heart."





MURIEL TRAMIS

Coktel Vision game designer

"The Amiga was a magical machine – a dream for creators in the late-Eighties. Its graphic power (32 to 64 colours, even 4,096) brought my worlds to life in *Méwilo*, *Freedom*, *Emmanuelle*, *Geisha* and *Fascination*. There was also *Gobliiins 1*, *2* and *3* with my fellow creator Pierre Gilhodes. It gave point-and-click adventure games a visual depth that was revolutionary.

Many old games were emulated to run on modern PCs, helping launch the retro-gaming wave in the 2000s. This gave them a second life – and reconnected me with Amiga lovers. It even inspired my new game, *Remembrance*, echoing my first two titles."

DAN MALONE

The Bitmap Brothers artist

"After working on several 8-bit games I was chomping at the bit for some 16-bit action. My last game at Palace, *Superthief*, was developed for the C64 and the Atari ST, so I'd had a taste of 16-bit. However, next up, I had my first encounter with the Commodore Amiga – and never looked back.

It was the perfect 16-bit machine – both the sound and the graphics – just itching for games to be made on it. I did my most well-known work on this great machine, using only the legendary piece of software called D-Paint. Before the PS1 came along like a tsunami changing game dev forever, the Amiga was the absolute definitive and as the years go by it stands out even more as a design classic."

MORIES

ANDREW BRAYBOOK

"We first saw the Amiga in 1986 and immediately fell in love: all those colours, all those CPU registers, all that memory… and Deluxe Paint! 8-bit contractual obligations kept us apart until 1989, when we got together to complete *Rainbow Islands*.

It wasn't until 1992 that we found out how to get the Amiga to really dance. It was hard work. There in the wings was the AGA Amiga 1200, even more proficient: sharper, faster, brighter still. In only three more years, they were gone, taken too soon. They shone so brightly at the time, they will never be forgotten."

TIM WRIGHT

PSYGNOSIS COMPOSER

"The Amiga allowed me to achieve my dreams. I learned to create music using SoundTracker, eventually composing themes for *Shadow Of The Beast II* and *III*, *Lemmings* and more. My brothers and I formed Jester Brothers International and made the *Fillet The Fish* demos.

It ultimately opened the door to my full-time position at Psygnosis – even scoring music for well-loved PlayStation games like *WipEout*, *Formula One* and *Krazy Ivan* using the Bars And Pipes MIDI sequencer on the Amiga 1200. It is the ideal platform – creative and welcoming. I even built my first website using an Amiga, and it essentially kick-started my entire musical career."

IAN STEWART

GREMLIN GRAPHICS FOUNDER

"The introduction of the Amiga was the key to unlocking what was the most exciting period in Gremlin's history. Working with Magnetic Fields was probably our most successful partnership, producing *Supercars 1* and *2* and the *Lotus Turbo Challenge* series of games.

Our internal dev teams embraced the Amiga producing popular strategy games including *Utopia*, *K240* and *FOFT (Federation Of Free Traders)*. Our racing games included *Nigel Mansell's World Championship Racing* and *Toyota Celica GT Rally*.

Our most successful game on the Amiga was *Zool*, an alien ninja from the Nth Dimension. Some classed the game as the Amiga's answer to Mario or Sonic but I was just happy for Zool to be mentioned in the same sentence! A big shout out to the guys at Commodore and all the Gremlin employees for making those years memorable."

ANDREAS TADIC

TEAM17 GAME DESIGNER

"The Amiga was, at least to my knowledge, the first machine with multitasking and co-processors. I learned to program and develop games on this computer, which was at the time a huge leap in technology.

My best memories from back then are sitting up late at night, finding new ways to make games better. When we released *Alien Breed*, it was a moment I fondly remember, the fantastic response we got and how we drove ourselves to improve all the time. It has given me a career I could only dream of. The Amiga era was certainly golden in every way."

IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** TAITO
- **DEVELOPER:** TAITO
- **PLATFORM:** ARCADE
- **RELEASED:** 1987
- **GENRE:** LIGHTGUN SHOOTER

THE MAKING OF

OPERATION WOLF

FEW ARCADE GAMES WERE AS IMPOSING, AS ICONIC OR AS INFLUENTIAL AS TAITO'S HIT COIN-OP THAT REDEFINED THE LIGHTGUN GENRE. IN THIS EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW, THE GAME'S DIRECTOR TOSHIAKI KATO REVEALS THE UNTOLD STORY BEHIND THE MAKING OF THIS ARCADE MILESTONE

WORDS BY MARTYN CARROLL

» [Arcade] Your attention is kindly drawn to the bikini-clad lady running across the background. Do not shoot her!

The noisy RAT-A-TAT-TAT of *Operation Wolf*'s machine gun reverberated around arcade halls when the game was released in November 1987. The worldwide success of *Operation Wolf* similarly reverberated around the arcade industry, triggering a wave of copycat lightgun games from Sega, SNK, Namco and more. Taito itself would license a dozen home conversions and produce three arcade sequels, beginning with *Operation Thunderbolt* in 1988.

But for a game that was so ground-breaking and influential on its release, Taito did not set out to create, what it later coined, "The world's no.1 arcade game." In fact, director Toshiaki Kato reveals that the original plans were much more conservative. "*Operation Wolf* was a product designed with conversion from older game cabinets in mind," he tells us. "From the initial planning stages, we were intending to release a conversion kit for the previously released *NY Captor* [1985] and *Cycle Shooting* [1986], so the same lightgun system was adopted." The success of *Operation Wolf* blew those titles away, but it reminds us that the game was just a new take on the shooting

» [Arcade] Perspective is used to excellent effect, with enemies popping up in front of you as you're busy targeting those in the background.

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

SPACE INVADERS
PLATFORM: ARCADE
RELEASED: 1978

BUBBLE BOBBLE
PLATFORM: ARCADE
RELEASED: 1986

CHASE HQ (PICTURED)
PLATFORM: ARCADE
RELEASED: 1988

» Toshiaki Kato joined Taito in the late-Seventies, straight out of university. He served as *Operation Wolf*s director.

» [Arcade] The random 'intermission' shoot-outs that pop up between stages are a good opportunity to stock up on vital supplies.

gallery games that had been making a din in arcades for decades.

Kato was well aware of the possibilities, and the practicalities of coin-op development, having joined the industry in the late-Seventies and working on both the hardware and software sides. "I joined Pacific Manufacturing, a subsidiary of Taito, right after the release of *Space Invaders* in 1978," he says. "The development department was led by Mr [Tomohiro] Nishikado, the creator of *Space Invaders*. Pacific Manufacturing was responsible for development and production, rather than Taito itself. We did everything by hand, including hardware design, software development and maintenance. I was involved in software development for *Astro Zone* and *Tri-Attacker* [both 1980], as well as assisting with *Space Cruiser* [1981]. Then, after moving to the Osaka Research And Development office, I worked as a hardware engineer on *Buggy Challenge* [1984] and *Wyvern F-0* [1985]. However, it was determined that working on hardware development alone was inefficient, so I shifted focus to software, working on *Kick And Run* [1986] before moving on to *Operation Wolf*. By this time, software development was being done using Hewlett-Packard workstations."

> **"WHEN THE DEVELOPMENT STARTED, I WAS WORKING ON IT ALONE FOR ABOUT THREE TO FOUR MONTHS"**
> **TOSHIAKI KATO**

The crack team Taito assembled to kick off the development was made up of… Mr Kato himself. "The programmers at Osaka R&D were busy with the driving game *Full Throttle*, so when the development started, I was working on it alone for about three to four months. I later received support from another staff member. I've worked on numerous other games besides *Operation Wolf*, but I was fortunate in that I started working on it alone, which allowed me to put a lot of effort into the enemy control system and other aspects, giving me some leeway in the work. This allowed me to spend a significant amount of time on the final balancing. I think the overall quality of the game is thanks to that." He is keen to point out that, even when the team was bolstered, there was still a lot of development freedom. "At that time, programmers didn't really listen to the designers and would add their own specifications and have the artists create new characters as they saw fit while developing the game."

What helped distinguish *Operation Wolf* from earlier lightgun games, in terms of graphics *and* gameplay, was the move from the Z80 CPU to a powerful new 68000-based system. The difference it made was night and day. "The new hardware allowed for a much greater number of sprites on-screen compared to the previous hardware, and allowed for the creation of large characters," says Kato "Taking advantage of this feature, the game designer created a specification with a sense of realism that had not been seen before. In traditional shooting gallery gun games, the focus was on accuracy, and the gameplay was straightforward. However,

» [Arcade] "I think the bombs that can be used when you're in trouble were a new feature not seen in the genre before," says Mr Kato. Well, we can't recall any earlier examples.

» [Arcade] You must protect the hostages in the final two stages. Hit them and they'll damn you to hell.

» [Arcade] At the end of the Jungle stage you face a dastardly mini-boss who uses a local as a human shield.

▶ in *Operation Wolf*, we sought to create a sense of realism that would give players a real adrenaline rush. So, rather than simply focussing on accurate shooting, we looked to create the exhilaration of using a real machine gun to cut a swath through the enemies. We also aimed to create a game that prioritised tension and immersion, like being part of a movie, with large, realistic characters in the style of American comics, rather than comical characters."

The influence of Western media was clear and quite deliberate. "In previous shooting games, the characters were comical and cute, but overseas sales staff complained that such characters would not sell overseas. It cannot be denied that we were conscious of the overseas market," Kato admits. The team was also keenly aware of American action cinema, including two 1985 movies in particular. "From the initial draft, I think *Commando* had a strong influence on the game designer. In terms of the worldview, I think it's more like *Rambo*, so he probably had both movies in mind."

For players embodying their inner John Matrix or John Rambo, a huge draw was the highly detailed character graphics. They actually looked like flesh and blood enemies, especially when they popped up in your personal space. Kato reveals that these depictions were drawn by the game's designer, who was a keen artist well versed in the American comic style. "He drew the main characters and images used in the interludes. He taught the other artists how to

OPERATIONAL EXCE

DON'T SPRAY AND PRAY

■ It's tempting at times, especially when the screen is swarming with enemies, but avoid holding down the trigger like a crazed John Rambo. Conserve your ammo by taking out enemies in controlled bursts – prioritising those in the foreground and working back.

CONSERVE YOUR ROCKETS

■ Bullets are limited, rockets even more so. You begin the game with just five, so you must use them wisely. Save them for helicopters, which are bullet sponges, taking ten hits to destroy. Ideally, try and get two (or even three) helicopters lined up for maximum return.

SHOOT THOSE LOVELY COCONUTS

■ You can find ammo hidden behind crates, but most bonus items are more creatively hidden. For example, in the Jungle stage, shoot the coconuts to earn more than milk. Elsewhere, shooting the pigs, chickens and eagles that foolishly enter the screen will give you goodies.

AIM FOR THE HEAD

■ In the final two stages you will encounter a super-soldier who's sporting a blond flattop and toting an M60. Crucially, he's wearing a bulletproof vest, so don't waste your ammo on his body. Instead, aim directly for his face and a couple of well-placed shots will take him out.

apply comic-book-style shadows and tones, but since the art style was so different from the small, comical characters they had been drawing up to that point, it was tough going at first," Kato points out. "Additionally, we'd developed a dedicated tool for character creation at Taito, enabling automatic conversion of multiple object files into data formats compatible with our various system boards. The tool also allowed for animation previews, so once the artists had the art style perfected, there were no further issues. The tool's interface featured an arcade-style joystick and numerous buttons assigned to various functions. It was a thing of wonder when they got up to speed with the art on that machine."

With the gameplay and the pixels in place, the development soon reached the fine-tuning phase. Kato remembers this stage well, beginning with tweaks to the process which registered the lightgun's position. "When firing, the screen flashes white to detect the scanlines, but the white screen proved to be too much of a strain on the eyes and caused issues with alignment, so we adjusted it with a blue tint," he explains. "The character animations were working as instructed, but how they were displayed, their timing, and the combinations of characters were all adjusted during development. Enemies didn't appear in predetermined patterns defined in a table, but rather incorporated random elements. Additionally, the civilian characters, who you're meant to avoid shooting, were initially very difficult to distinguish from the enemies, so we requested that the character

> "WE SOUGHT TO CREATE A SENSE OF REALISM THAT WOULD GIVE PLAYERS A REAL ADRENALINE RUSH"
> **TOSHIAKI KATO**

designer make them clearly identifiable – which is how we ended up with characters like the bikini-clad women." Tuning the game for extended periods did present Kato with an occupational hazard. "When testing the game with a gun controller, the vibration of the gun felt really good, but it put a strain on my hands, making coding on the keyboard difficult afterwards!"

As the game neared completion, attention was turned to the international release. "Most Japanese developers were unaware of overseas trends and preferences, so the overseas sales staff's advice was taken as gospel," explains Kato. These recommendations resulted in one significant change, which ultimately dumbed-down the team's vision. "The original plan was to have a strategic element where players could choose stages, with the addition of random events to keep them entertained. However, when balancing the game for the international markets, the overseas sales staff advised us that stage selection would not go down well, and we should lock the order of stages. As a result, only the Japanese version was released with ▶

DEPLOYING THE CS PACK

WHEN OPERATION NIGHT STRIKERS HEADS HOME...

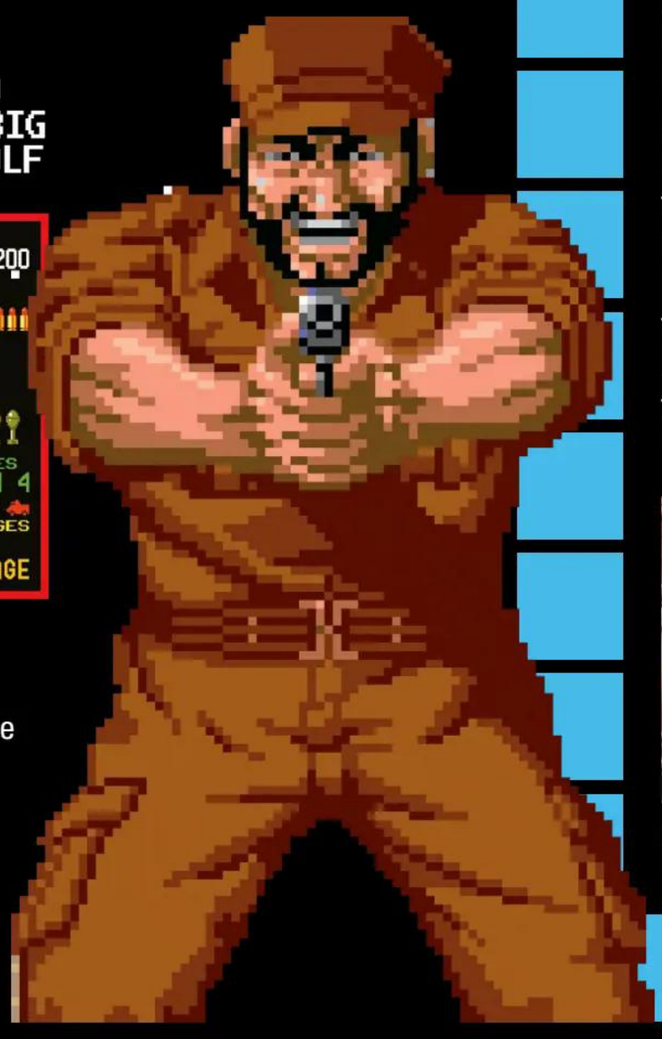
■ Available alongside *Operation Night Strikers* is the *CS Pack*. The paid DLC features various home conversions of the four main games, including the NES/Famicom and Master System versions of *Operation Wolf*. The two versions are quite similar, although the Sega game is more polished, and is probably the best of all the 8-bit ports that were released. Also included is the 1994 SNES version of *Operation Thunderbolt*, which was originally only released in the United States and adds a choice of six playable characters, plus a non-linear mission structure. The 1992 Master System version of *Space Gun* and the 1993 Mega-CD version of *Night Striker* round out the package.

As you'd expect from M2, the standard of emulation is excellent. It's a shame there are no home-computer conversions included, but maybe that will change in future collections. Speaking on that very subject, M2 CEO Naoki Horii tells us, "Once we've ported from a certain platform a number of times, it's relatively easy to get a game from that platform running, so my interest lies in including European computer versions such as the Commodore 64. Each version has its own unique character, so I feel that there's both meaning and significance in porting them."

» [Switch] The Master System version of *Operation Wolf* is one of the highlights of the *CS Pack*.

ELLENCE

HOW TO BE A BIG BAD WOLF



TRY USING DELAY TACTICS

■ At the end of a stage, if you're low on ammo but fairly healthy, leave a single enemy alive on the screen. Until you defeat them, the stage will continue, and you'll be rewarded with plenty of bonus ammo. When your supply is topped up, pop the enemy and move on.

PROTECT THE HOSTAGES

■ The aim of the game is to provide the hostages with safe passage on the Concentration Camp and Airport stages. This means not shooting them accidentally, of course, but also protecting them from the knife-wielding assassins who try to stab them in the back.

» [Switch] All of the included games feature a range of borders and display options.

» [Switch] *Night Striker* isn't as well known outside of Japan. It's an overlooked gem of a game.

CONVERSION INTEL

YUJIRO YAMAMOTO OF M2 AND YUICHI TOYAMA OF TAITO TALK OPERATION NIGHT STRIKERS

Operation Night Strikers includes _Operation Wolf_ plus several other classic lightgun games. What is the biggest challenge when porting these titles?

Yujiro Yamamoto: Without a doubt, the biggest problem we faced was the controls. Most of the games M2 has ported so far have used joysticks and buttons, but this know-how was useless when it came to working with games where the controller itself was unique. This meant we had to come up with new specifications from scratch. Fortunately, the Nintendo Switch has gyro controls, so we were able to achieve controls as close as possible to the original gun controller. Additionally, there are two other methods – mouse controls and stick controls – allowing users to find what works for them. During development, a thought crossed my mind several times, "If only this project had come up 15 years ago when the Wii Remote and PlayStation Move were available…"

» Yujiro Yamamoto oversaw the *Operation Night Strikers* project at M2.

» Yuichi Toyama is a producer at Taito, who worked alongside the M2 team.

> "WE HAD TO COME UP WITH NEW SPECIFICATIONS FROM SCRATCH..." YUJIRO YAMAMOTO

Which quality-of-life features do you think gamers will appreciate most about _Operation Night Strikers_?

YY: We have added various elements, but I think the most important one is the Easy Mode in the gun games. The original versions of those titles are all very difficult, and even top players find it difficult to finish them without continuing. M2 prides itself on the high quality of its ports, but no matter how high the quality, if the game isn't fun to play, it means very little. Therefore, we've included a newly adjusted mode that greatly increases the player's ability and allows them to progress smoothly.

Yuichi Toyama: Of the four titles, *Night Striker* is the most popular in Japan. There are special strategies such as 'pacifist' where you play without shooting any enemies, and M2 has added gadgets which display internal parameters for when playing like this. I think Japanese players will be happy, and perhaps overseas players will gain a new appreciation for the game?

The compilation features the previously unseen European version of _Night Striker_. How did that come about?

YY: This was discovered by chance when backing up the ROM data stored in Taito's warehouse. Even the arcade development team members who were interviewed were unaware of its existence, so at first it was assumed to be a development build. However, upon reviewing the documents, it was discovered that it was a project carried out by a very small team. Although this title is not being published as an M2 *ShotTriggers* game, our policy is to include overseas versions and minor versions whenever possible, so we proposed to Taito that it be incorporated in the release. By the way, one of the reasons for the popularity of *Night Striker* in Japan is its music, but in the European version, the music for stages had been removed and replaced with additional sound effects.

YT: The original development staff revealed that the stage background music was removed at the request of Taito's European staff. The composer was very disappointed to have his work removed.

Did the home conversions included as DLC pose additional problems?

YY: If we'd only supported standard game pads, the console ports would have been easy to include, but we felt we needed to go the extra mile for the DLC, so we did our best to replicate the special controllers as much as we could. In particular, the SMS Light Phaser and SNES Super Scope had different signal processing from the arcade original, making the console adaptations more challenging. While most players at the time likely used standard game pads, I hope you'll take the opportunity to experience how unique those special controllers felt back then.

» [Master System] The excellent Sega 8-bit version arrived late, in 1990. It was worth the wait.

the stage-select feature." In addition, this alteration forced a change to the game's conclusion, where the player is appraised by the US President. In the Japanese version there are four alternative endings, which are chosen depending on how many stages you successfully clear. Whereas in the international version, there are just two endings – the President shakes your hand if you rescue at least one hostage, or shakes his fist if all of the hostages perish, hollering, "We won't ask *you* again!" Speaking about the decision to include alternative endings, Kato says, "If the player fails, you want to encourage them to play again and successfully finish the game, otherwise the game will not generate income. I think it's natural to have multiple endings for a game, which are based on skill, rather than an ending which is always the same."

The 'bad' ending is another example of the humour that's present in the game. There are the aforementioned bikini beach babes, who've somehow taken a sharp left turn into a warzone. Elsewhere, if you accidentally shoot a hostage, they grow a pair of angel wings and ascend to the heavens while berating your shooting skills. Yet these moments of light relief were overshadowed by the press reaction to the game's body count. On release, most UK press reviews mentioned the level of violence on display. "*Operation Wolf*

» [NES] Despite suffering from flickery sprites, the NES version was pretty good – and included support for the Zapper.

» [Arcade] Your route through the game. In the Japanese version, you get to choose which of the first four stages you tackle.

» [Arcade] It's funny how such small things can lodge in the memory, like the overly dramatic pause between 'finished' and 'here' on the game over screen.

» [Arcade] There's a strong whiff of *Rambo* at the end of the game where you take on an enemy gunship.

» [Arcade] Taito released a quick-fire sequel, *Operation Thunderbolt*, in 1988. It featured 'into-the-screen' stages, co-op play and an even greater body count.

takes realism a little too far..." opined *ACE* magazine. "Sheer, unadulterated violence is the main theme in *Operation Wolf*," wrote *CVG*. "The action is fast and furious, not to mention violent and tasteless," commented *Your Sinclair*. In response, Kato reveals that the team didn't intentionally set out to make an excessive game. "At the time, we weren't too concerned about pushing the limits, so much as being focussed on providing the players, who were paying to play, with enjoyment. Regarding overseas reactions, there may have been reports to upper management, but I don't think detailed information reached the development team. There were no requests for revisions."

As is usually the case, the clones that followed – such as SNK's *Mechanized Attack* (1989), Sega's *Line Of Fire* (1989) and Namco's *Steel Gunner* (1990) – were even more over the top. SNK's *Beast Busters* (1990) and Taito's own *Space Gun* (1990), which in a parallel world would have been called *Operation Xenomorph*, both added blood and guts to the mix and made *Operation Wolf* look decidedly tame in comparison. Kato is not surprised by all the clones that hit the market. "Games have always evolved by incorporating unique ideas from other games. In that sense, I think it's expected for similar games to appear."

Echoing *Operation Wolf*'s arcade success, the game was a hit on multiple home systems. Ocean Software brought the game to home computers, and the results were generally very good, with the ST and Amiga versions (developed by Ocean France) being the standouts. It was also converted to a number of consoles, including the NES, Master System and PC Engine (interestingly, the PC Engine version was the only one to copy *Operation Thunderbolt*'s USP and offer support for co-op play). The NES and Master System versions were developed by Taito, but Kato and his team were not involved with them. "Back then, the arcade development teams and the console development teams were basically separate departments," he says. "The arcade team rarely had any involvement in the ports. Although there was some sharing of development materials and enquiries about certain specifications, our focus was on developing for the arcade, so porting to home consoles was mostly left to the console team."

"THE VIBRATION OF THE GUN FELT REALLY GOOD, BUT IT PUT A STRAIN ON MY HANDS, MAKING CODING ON THE KEYBOARD DIFFICULT!"
TOSHIAKI KATO

Now, as *Operation Wolf* approaches its 40th anniversary, the game heads home once more as part of Taito's *Operation Night Strikers*. This compilation, currently available on Steam and Switch, also features three more Taito arcade titles – *Operation Thunderbolt*, *Space Gun* and *Night Striker*. Developed by M2, it delivers faithful versions of each game, plus some welcome quality-of-life features (see **RG**'s review in last month's issue).

Kato admits to being pleased with the positive reaction to the release, and of course he's particularly happy that trigger-happy players are revisiting *Operation Wolf*. "I am hugely grateful that there are still fans out there. At the time, arcade game development was mainly carried out by small teams over short periods of time, and the developers were deeply immersed in the games, putting a lot of thought and passion into them, with the aim of creating something that they themselves could enjoy. As a developer, nothing makes me happier than fans of the game coming back and finding a nostalgic and fun experience. I sincerely hope they find it enjoyable." ✱

Special thanks to James Wragg, Bryan McPhail and, of course, Toshiaki Kato for sharing his memories.

ULTIMATE GUIDE

BATMAN

HOT ON THE HEELS OF A 1989 MOVIE THAT BROKE BOX-OFFICE RECORDS, BATMAN SWOOPED ONTO A RANGE OF HOME COMPUTERS TO GREAT ACCLAIM. WITH GRAPHICS THAT NAILED THE ATMOSPHERE OF THE FILM, IT WAS A SHINING EXAMPLE OF A MOVIE TIE-IN DONE RIGHT

WORDS BY GRAHAM PEMBREY

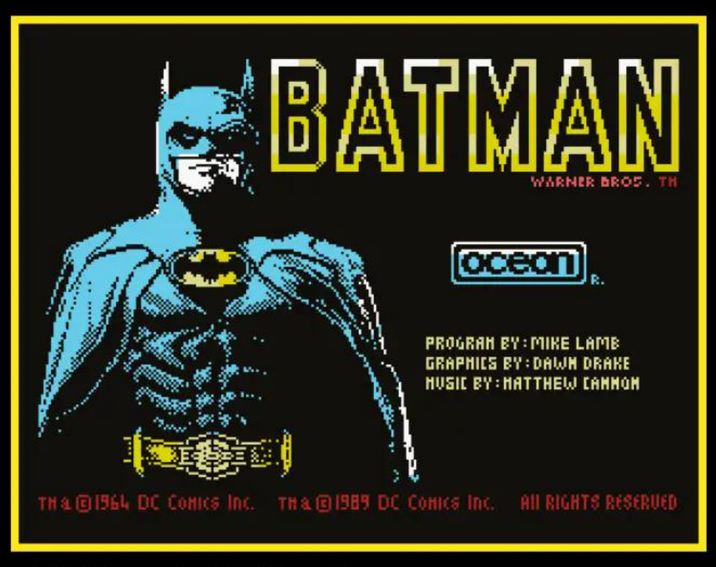
IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** OCEAN SOFTWARE
- **DEVELOPER:** OCEAN SOFTWARE
- **PLATFORM:** AMIGA, VARIOUS
- **RELEASED:** 1989
- **GENRE:** ACTION

By the end of the Eighties there was a justified wariness about games based on films. Some games of this kind had fared admirably, including *Ghostbusters* by David Crane and the atmospheric *Aliens: The Computer Game*, which suitably spooked home-computer users. And yet many film tie-ins had fallen short, including the famously disastrous *ET: The Extra-Terrestrial* for the Atari 2600 and the lacklustre *Jaws* for the NES. Fortunately, Ocean Software was in the Batmobile's driving seat for the game adaptation of Tim Burton's 1989 box-office smash. Having just successfully converted Data East's excellent *RoboCop* arcade hit to home computers (which Data East weirdly licensed from Ocean), and with titles such as *Rambo* under its belt, the company had proven its worth when it came to handling Hollywood IP. On the release of *Batman*, which is also sometimes known as *Batman: The Movie*, it was declared to be an "outstanding film licence" in *Amstrad Action*, while *CVG* went as far as reporting it to be "definitely the best film tie-in yet".

Perhaps the most immediately striking aspect of the game is how closely it matches the dark, brooding style of its silver screen source material. Moody pixel art loading screens, particularly on the Amiga version, depict characters from the film deftly, while the five levels tick many of the boxes on our wish list for role-playing the Caped Crusader, from lobbing a Batarang to driving the Batmobile. Your adventure begins and finishes with

» [Amiga] Art screens like this one depict quotes and characters from the movie in glorious detail.


BATMAN
WARNER BROS. TM
ocean
PROGRAM BY: MIKE LAMB
GRAPHICS BY: DAWN DRAKE
MUSIC BY: MATTHEW CANNON
TM & © 1964 DC Comics Inc. TM & © 1989 DC Comics Inc. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

» [MSX] Even on the MSX, the art team managed to produce lovely pixel art.

"PERHAPS THE MOST IMMEDIATELY STRIKING ASPECT OF THE GAME IS HOW CLOSELY IT MATCHES THE DARK, BROODING STYLE OF ITS SILVER SCREEN SOURCE MATERIAL"

side-scrolling action platforming stages, which take place within the Axis Chemical Plant and Gotham Cathedral respectively. Flinging yourself between platforms using your Bat Rope in these segments is a joy, although the steep difficulty curve is intense at the start of the game (and arguably throughout it). Health-preservation is particularly paramount as you clamber around the stark industrial setting of the chemical plant.

Should you persevere and make it to the second stage, you'll be treated to a high-speed driving challenge set on the streets of Gotham, while the third level does something completely different by setting you a cryptic puzzle to solve on a vaguely *Tetris*-style grid, with just one minute on the timer. The fourth level puts you in control of the Batwing, soaring through the streets of Gotham attempting to mow down carnival balloons that the Joker has filled with ▶

» [Amiga] There's stealthy satisfaction to be had in shimmying up behind enemies using your Bat Rope.

PACK ATTACK

HOW THE BATMAN PACK PROPELLED AMIGA SALES

■ In his book *Commodore: The Inside Story*, former Commodore managing director David Pleasance recalls the discussions with Ocean in which he orchestrated the Batman Pack. Combining an Amiga 500 with *Batman*, Deluxe Paint II, *F/A-18 Interceptor* and *The NewZealand Story*, the pack promoted the Amiga as a versatile games machine with family wide appeal. It retailed at £399.

By David's account, Ocean had paid $1 million for the *Batman* licence, and it was initially hesitant about being involved in an arrangement that might affect direct game sales. Eventually though a deal was struck. "The first ever pack was born," David writes. "From then on we sold dreams." By Christmas of 1989, Commodore had reportedly sold 186,000 Batman Packs. There was even a TV advert for the bundle voiced by Stephen Fry. It was the first of many successful Amiga bundles and also helped to secure Ocean's fortunes.

» The Caped Crusader helped sell a lot of Amiga 500s. Image credit: Vasilis Psomiadis

» [Amiga] Speeding through the streets of Gotham in the Batmobile is a treat.

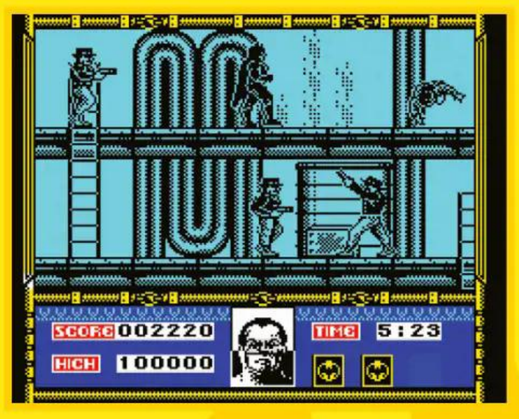
CONVERSION CAPERS

AMIGA

■ With many Amiga gamers introduced to *Batman* through the Batman Pack, it quickly became one of the most-widely owned games on the platform. There's something almost coin-op-like about the fast loading times, smooth scrolling and pulsating music that made this a really exciting version.

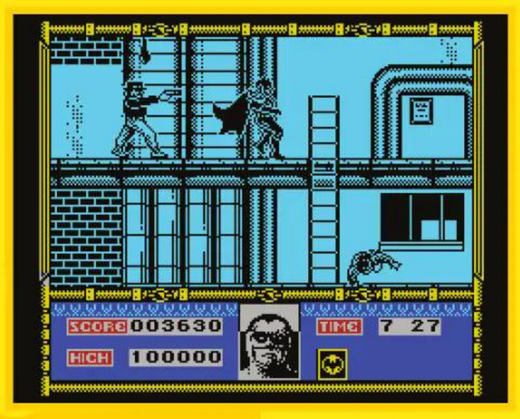
ATARI ST

■ ST owners got something very close to the Amiga version, just with slightly weaker sound and less smooth scrolling if you look carefully. Interestingly, there are some differences in the still artwork screens that appear between levels, including the screen shown here that doesn't feature in the Amiga game.



ZX SPECTRUM

■ Although Ocean stripped back the graphics of the 16-bit versions, the Spectrum game feels great to play. Despite its monochrome colour palette, the sprites and backgrounds are clearly defined, and the sound is decent too. It's no wonder *Crash* magazine readers voted it Game Of The Year.



MSX

■ While MSX machines were extremely big in Japan they were less popular in the West, so we doubt too many of you will have played this version back in the day. As you might expect, It's very similar to the Spectrum version of the game, but features paler visuals and simplified sound.

▶ poisonous gas. Somewhat surprisingly, there are no boss fights to contend with at any point. The closest you'll get is hitting Jack Napier into a vat of acid at the end of level one, thus creating the Joker, and then knocking said villain off his helicopter ladder at the very end. Both of these encounters are one-hit kills rather than dramatic boss battles. There are also no extra weapons, power-ups or health pick-ups to be found throughout the whole experience, bucking some typical action game tropes of the time. Despite that, the levels dish out novelty in other ways. The sheer variety of the levels and the ways in which they match up with scenes from the film make the action feel diverse and compelling.

Among the biggest differences between the 8-bit and 16-bit versions concerns the graphics during the driving and flying levels. On the Commodore 64, Spectrum and Amstrad CPC, these sequences have a side-on perspective that works well enough given the hardware constraints. But Amiga, Atari ST and DOS gamers are treated to a behind-the-vehicle view of a detailed city skyline and scenes of 3D light animation that felt particularly fast-paced and impressive at the time of release. This was partly the result of Ocean smartly setting artist Bill Harbison and programmer John O'Brien the task of using their driving game knowledge from the Spectrum conversion of *Chase HQ*, and applying it to putting players in control of the Batmobile and Batwing. *Zzap! Amiga* was particularly bowled over by this part of the game, reporting as part of its 97% rated review that, "The first level is a better challenge, but the Batmobile section – well, words fail me – the 3D effect has more speed and detail than I thought possible." As for developers involved in other parts of the game, Bill credits lead programmer Michael Lamb, who worked across every conversion, and artist Dawn Drake, for being integral to the side-scrolling levels that bookend the experience.

» [Amiga] In an interesting change of pace, the third stage revolves around a cryptic logic puzzle.

Memorable music and audio design also lifted the game above many others of the time. On the title screen of the 16-bit versions you'll hear the iconic sampled speech of, "What are you?" followed by, "I'm Batman," recognisable directly from the film, which suggested that Ocean must have had some level of inside access before the cinematic release. On the other hand, Bill Harbison tells us he had to track down a toy Batmobile in order to know how he should draw it. He also recalls the team being disappointed not to be ▶

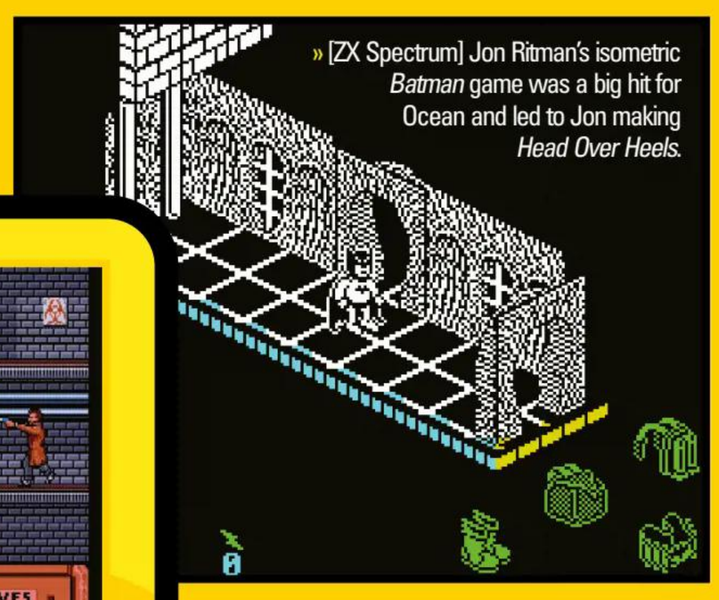
MORE CAPED CRUSADES

A BRIEF HISTORY OF OTHER EIGHTIES BATMAN GAMES

■ The first *Batman* game released by Ocean, and in fact the first videogame outing for the Dark Knight full stop, was an 8-bit isometric adventure launched in 1986. Like the 1989 game, it was also called simply *Batman*. Made by Jon Ritman and Bernie Drummond, it was a forerunner to their classic creation *Head Over Heels* which came just a year later.

Another notable *Batman* game of the era was *Batman: The Caped Crusader* (above), published by Ocean in 1988 but developed by Special FX. With the gameplay framed in pop-out panels with speech bubbles and colourful graphics, it was very much aligned to the comic-book legacy of the Caped Crusader rather than his on-screen escapades.

In December 1989, Sunsoft released *Batman: The Video Game* for the NES in Japan, with Western releases coming soon after. Another tie-in with the film, its side-scrolling platform action was well reviewed.



» [ZX Spectrum] Jon Ritman's isometric *Batman* game was a big hit for Ocean and led to Jon making *Head Over Heels*.

HOW DOES THE DARK KNIGHT FARE ACROSS THE 8-BIT AND 16-BIT VERSIONS?

C64

■ With bright colours and plenty of fast action, the Commodore 64 version of *Batman* is certainly worth checking out. Unlike the other versions, the difficulty level feels slightly more forgiving. Like other 8-bit versions, its driving and flying levels are simpler side-on affairs instead of the striking 16-bit showcases.

AMSTRAD CPC

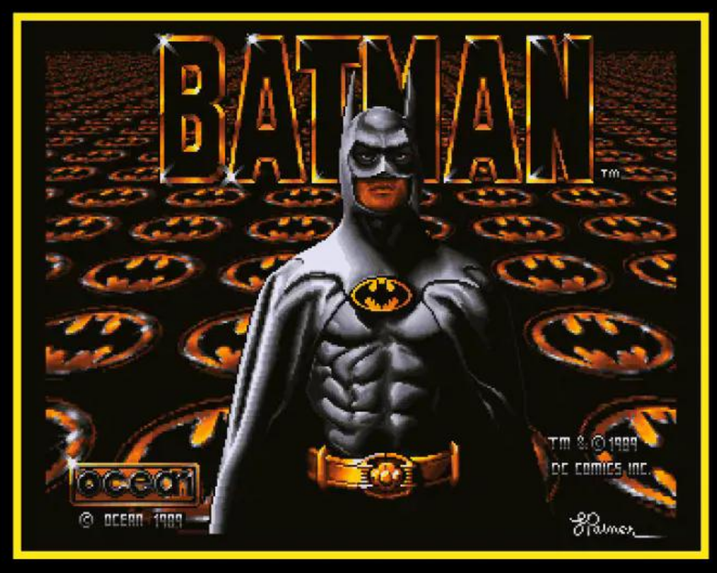
■ Chunky-looking graphics don't stop the Amstrad CPC game from being a lot of fun to play. It still contains all the recognisable imagery from the film fans had hoped for. The backgrounds are more detailed than the C64 version in places and everything plays at a nippy speed. It's another solid 8-bit conversion.

PC (DOS)

■ Released a year after the other versions of the game, *Batman* on the PC offers graphical polish and smooth enough action, but its darker colours tone down the atmosphere somewhat. Crucially, the lack of in-game music and very basic sound effects render it a downgrade from the other 16-bit versions.

"AMONG THE BIGGEST DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE 8-BIT AND 16-BIT VERSIONS CONCERNS THE GRAPHICS DURING THE DRIVING AND FLYING LEVELS"

» [Amiga] In the Batwing stage you'll mow down carnival balloons filled with poisonous gas.



given a sneak preview of the film, which arrived in cinemas in June 1989 in the US, and in August the same year in the UK, with the game following swiftly after in September. It was a perfectly timed launch and a huge success for Ocean, especially on the Amiga where the Batman Pack hardware and software bundle boosted sales of the Amiga 500 to new heights. There was plenty of love for the game on other platforms too. *ST Format* observed that, "Principally because of the massive variation between levels, there's a strong incitement to progress further and further into the game, ably assisted by some superb graphics." *Commodore Format* meanwhile seemed to be lost for adequate adjectives about the Commodore 64 version, telling its readers, "This is great stuff. The graphics are spinky, sprites are spanky and gameplay is sponky."

Undeniably, much like the Caped Crusader himself, the game is rock hard. This did temper the reaction of some critics. There are no passwords, no save option, and three lives to see you through the whole thing. The frustrations of trying and failing to fling your Batmobile around corners using your grappling hook, or guessing the right solutions to the logic puzzle level, can be very real. The game manual has some genuinely sage advice for the first and final levels, at least, "Master control of the Bat Rope. Work out a quick route to the end. Shoot on sight." That guidance about alternative routes in particular is worth heeding, as there are a few places where choosing one path over another will get you to the exit much quicker. If all else fails, some readers who had the game for the Amiga might remember that typing 'jammmmm' on the title screen grants you infinite lives and the ability to skip levels with F10.

Despite the steep challenge it lays down, the combination of awesome audio tracks, detailed graphics, smart level design and a close likeness to the film coalesced into something very special that retains a real charm today. *Batman* marked an important point in the history of Ocean Software, and it set a high bar for other videogame film licences that followed. ✱

AMIGA SUPERHEROES

FURTHER SUPERHERO SHENANIGANS WORTH TRYING

THE AMAZING SPIDER-MAN

■ Set in a film studio with sets based on movie genres, this enjoyable adventure pits you as a tiny sprite traversing multiple screens whilst slinging your web and solving simple puzzles. It's an unusual delight with lots of character and loads of pleasant surprises.

SUPERHERO

■ This promising Psygnosis game was playable as a *One Amiga* coverdisk demo, combining platform and beat-'em-up elements. Sadly it was never released, reportedly due to an office police raid that damaged computer equipment. Check out the indieretronews.com for the full story.

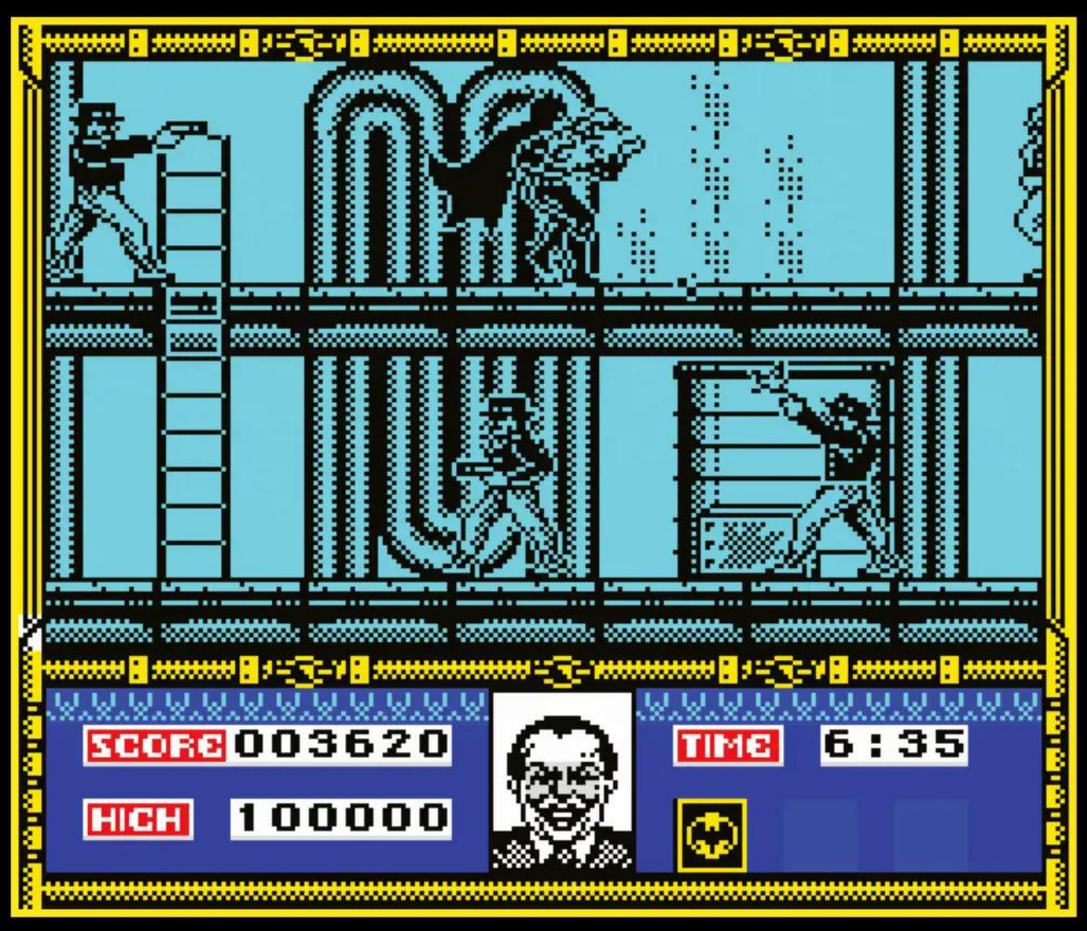
TEENAGE MUTANT HERO TURTLES

■ A fun conversion of the NES Turtles romp, this was a better option for Amiga owners than *Teenage Mutant Hero Turtles: The Coin-Op*, which raised hopes of arcade action with its title but then dashed them with sluggish performance.

SUPERFROG

■ Is it a bird? Is it a plane? Is it a…frog? While he might be a tad different from the Marvel and DC league of superhero, Team17's Superfrog has a special place in the hearts of Amiga fans for his fast-paced platform antics.

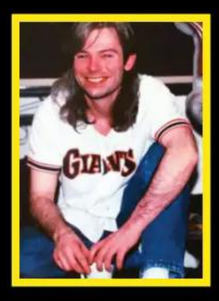
"UNDENIABLY, MUCH LIKE THE CAPED CRUSADER HIMSELF, THE GAME IS ROCK HARD"



» [ZX Spectrum] It's easy to get overwhelmed by baddies bombarding you from all angles on the first level.

» [C64] You're about to knock Jack Napier into a vat of acid, inadvertently creating the Joker.

ARTIST Q&A



BILL HARBISON ON BRINGING THE BATMOBILE TO HOME COMPUTERS

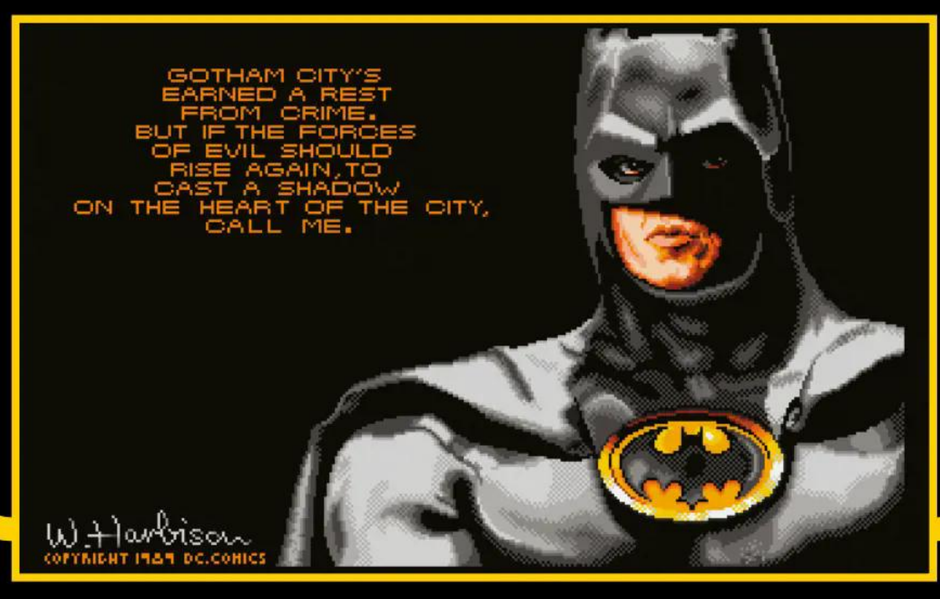
What led up to you working on *Batman*?
I'd just finished [the Spectrum version of] *Chase HQ*. While I was working on that I was given an Atari ST to work on. Going from two colours to 16 colours was quite interesting! So I was practising doing 16-colour graphics in my spare time while I was waiting for whatever project I was going to be doing next. I found out from [Ocean Boss] Gary Bracey that we're basically doing *Chase HQ* again, but with higher-resolution graphics, more colours… and the Batmobile. Me and John O'Brien had been working together on driving games. He'd done the engine for *Chase HQ* and rewritten it for the Atari ST and Amiga. I think Gary just thought, right well they did a decent enough job, we'll keep them together and put them on *Batman*.

Which graphics did you work on?
My contribution was the Batmobile scenes, including the objects on the road and in the background. Those were also used in the Batwing scenes, which John Palmer did the Batwing animation for. Anything like cars coming in and out of the distance and buildings, that's what I did. And the animation for the Batmobile. With the cars going into the distance, we didn't have any scaling software, so we had to draw each frame and decide at which point we needed to pop sprites into the next size up like it was going seamlessly into the distance.

We know you also created the art of *Batman* on the ending screen, as your signature is on it.
Yeah, there were comments going around the artists saying, "Well we don't have a contract at Ocean. They don't own any of your work, so if you sign your work it belongs to you." That's why everybody signed their images.

"THE MAIN CHALLENGE WAS THAT WE DIDN'T KNOW WHAT THE BATMOBILE LOOKED LIKE"
BILL HARBISON

Were there any big challenges that you had to tackle?
The main challenge was that we didn't know what the Batmobile looked like. We'd only seen an image of a bit of the side. We had no idea about the front. It was only a couple of weeks before the deadline, and I was in a comic-book shop in Manchester where I used to go with some of the lads for a look around. And there was this [holds up a toy Batmobile] which I took straight to the counter. I went straight back to the office and started drawing it.


GOTHAM CITY'S EARNED A REST FROM CRIME. BUT IF THE FORCES OF EVIL SHOULD RISE AGAIN, TO CAST A SHADOW ON THE HEART OF THE CITY, CALL ME.
W. J. Harbison
COPYRIGHT 1989 DC COMICS

THE EVOLUTION OF BANJO-KAZOOIE

THE FINAL ITERATION OF RARE'S PROJECT DREAM, BANJO-KAZOOIE BECAME A BEST-SELLER THAT RECEIVED MULTIPLE FOLLOW-UPS. BANJO CREATORS CHRIS SUTHERLAND, ED BRYAN, GAVIN HOOD, GARY RICHARDS AND STEVE MALPASS EXPLAIN HOW THE SERIES EVOLVED

WORDS BY RORY MILNE

» [Nintendo 64] It may look nothing like it, but the Rare project *Dream* ultimately evolved into *Banjo-Kazooie*.

» [Nintendo 64] The benefit of controlling two characters in *Banjo-Kazooie* is that each one learns different moves.

» [Nintendo 64] With the aid of red feathers, the titular heroes of *Banjo-Kazooie* can soar to new heights.

"WE FELT THERE SHOULD BE A REASON FOR THE DOUBLE-JUMP, AND SOMEONE SAID THERE COULD BE THESE WINGS THAT CAME OUT OF BANJO'S BACKPACK THAT COULD FLAP"

CHRIS SUTHERLAND

During Rare's Nintendo days, the studio made a habit of producing cutting-edge games on aging hardware. In late-1994, its pre-rendered platformer *Donkey Kong Country* allowed the sprite-focussed SNES to compete with the polygon-powered PlayStation, however a contemporary project codenamed *Project Dream* was struggling to find form. It too employed pre-rendered visuals, but was isometric rather than side-on. *Dream* was an action adventure featuring pirates that was intended to be vast in scale, and it was pushing the SNES even further than *Donkey Kong Country*. Character designer Ed Bryan joined the *Dream* team after cutting his teeth at Rare on a coin-op brawler. "I was in the *Killer Instinct* stable for a little while, after that I moved to a project in the *Donkey Kong* barn that was called *Dream*," Ed recalls. "We were working on the Super NES, but we were using all of this rendered stuff in PowerAnimator on these Silicon Graphics machines. We were trying to make some huge *Zelda*-like game in 3D with pirates."

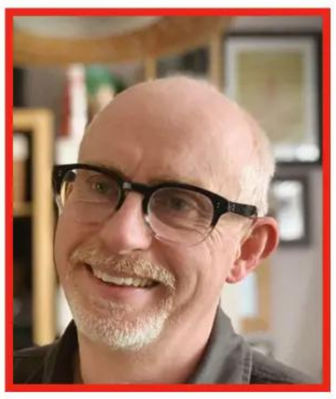
Sometime after Ed started working on the project, it was moved to the N64. Then shortly after finishing *Donkey Kong Country 2*, coder Chris Sutherland joined Ed on *Dream*. Chris reflects on some major changes as it went from one iteration to another. "The main character was a boy called Edison, but then it got changed to a bear," Chris recollects. "There was a top-down 3D environment where you were chased by Trolls, then we looked at doing something more like *Donkey Kong Country* but in 3D, and after that we went more to a fixed side-on camera. We were then shown what the *Conker* team was doing. It had managed to get very high-quality polygonal backgrounds, and so we took that approach as well. That was when we started *Banjo-Kazooie*, as it was to become later on."

The name *Banjo-Kazooie* came from its two player characters: Banjo; the aforementioned bear, and Kazooie; a colourful bird. Not only did Kazooie's introduction make sense of an otherwise nonsensical concept, but it also allowed for two contrasting movesets. "We felt there should be a *reason* for the double-jump, and someone said there could be these wings that came out of Banjo's backpack that could flap," Chris explains. "Then the extension to that was why not just have another character that had wings? That was where Kazooie came out of. We could then use her for other moves, like legs that came out the bottom of the backpack and run. It gave us more opportunities for variety. Otherwise we were limited by the fact that, for example, Banjo could only go at a certain speed."

The *Banjo-Kazooie* team had some moves in mind that didn't necessarily suit their heroes, and in any case these might spoil the ▶

INTERVIEWEES

CHRIS SUTHERLAND
■ *Banjo-Kazooie* and *Tooie* coder Chris Sutherland is now a member of the Playtonic Games team.



ED BRYAN
■ Also now at Playtonic, Ed Bryan designed characters for *Banjo-Kazooie*, *Tooie* and *Nuts & Bolts*.

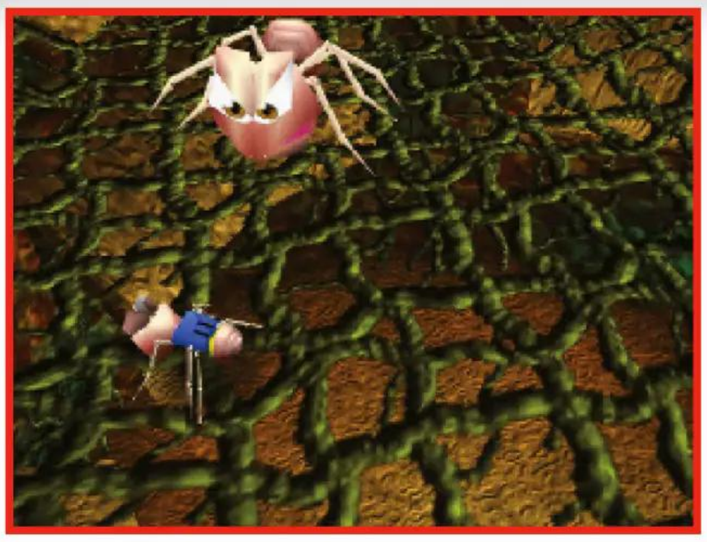
GARY RICHARDS
■ The designer of *Banjo-Pilot*, Gary Richards is another of the talented crew at Playtonic Games.

STEVE MALPASS
■ After doing QA for *Banjo-Kazooie*, Steve Malpass was a designer on *Tooie* and *Nuts & Bolts*.

STAGES OF EVOLUTION: THE STOP 'N' SWOP SAGA

CHRIS SUTHERLAND RECALLS BANJO'S UNUSED N64 TECH TRICK

■ "The way that Stop 'N' Swop came about was that Paul Machacek, who worked on *Banjo-Kazooie* and *Tooie*, noticed that when you turned the power supply to the N64 off and on quickly the contents of the RAM were preserved. So the things you had written to the memory were still there. He thought that since that was the case, if he switched off the N64, took out one game, put in another game and switched it back on – and then instead of clearing the memory, if he checked the same location in RAM, then he could find information from the previous game. So he devised a technique where there was this particular place in memory where he could write information from *Banjo-Kazooie* detailing the things you had collected and then when *Banjo-Tooie* started up it would find these flags set in RAM that meant you had done certain things in the first game. Then based on that it would unlock certain things in the second game. So Paul explained it to Tim Stamper, and they were excited about doing that. I think at the time they knew Nintendo wouldn't think it was that good an idea, so they tried to get to the point where it was pretty much all working and then told Nintendo about it. Nintendo then told them that they couldn't do it because it was too risky. I suppose nobody at Rare wanted to say what Stop 'N' Swop was after that because nobody wanted to upset Nintendo."



» [Nintendo 64] As *Banjo-Kazooie*'s transformations go, Banjo's termite form is one of the least glamorous.

game's challenge. Their solution was to limit these abilities to areas that Banjo could only tackle while in another form. "We didn't want you to be able to use those moves in the rest of the game because it would break everything, so we limited them by changing what the character was," Chris reasons. "The problem was that when you went back to some areas they became a lot easier or it made it a lot more complicated in terms of design. Playing as a different character was also a much more fun experience. I mean, Mario has his different suits that he wears, and in the case of Banjo he transformed into a washing machine, or whatever it was."

The fact that *Banjo-Kazooie* sold millions on release reflected how well players responded to the game's two heroes, their moves and Banjo's transformations. Character designer Ed Bryan remembers being excited to start work on a sequel. "We were absolutely buzzing because *Banjo-Kazooie* had been a huge success, so we were thinking that we should just get on and make the next one," Ed enthuses. "I think we were more relaxed about *Banjo-Tooie*, because of course we knew how to do it, whereas with the first one we felt like we were making it up as we went along."

> "WE WERE ABSOLUTELY BUZZING BECAUSE BANJO-KAZOOIE HAD BEEN A HUGE SUCCESS, SO WE WERE THINKING THAT WE SHOULD JUST GET ON AND MAKE THE NEXT ONE"
>
> **ED BRYAN**

There was still a certain amount of making things up for *Banjo-Tooie*, however, in that it had new features like solo missions for its two protagonists and FPS sections inspired by an earlier Rare title, as *Banjo* coder Chris Sutherland notes. "There were four or five of us on the *Banjo* team that would play *GoldenEye*, probably every lunchtime for a couple of years, so that was a strong influence on *Banjo-Tooie*," Chris reminisces. "Then I think Gregg Mayles always wanted to have Banjo and Kazooie separate and then join up. It just felt like the next logical step. Once we split the characters apart suddenly your moveset was reduced, so you couldn't do all the things you could do before. It was another way to give you a different set of moves. Then there were missions built around that."

A fresh approach was also taken with how the protagonists of *Banjo-Tooie* learned new abilities. They attained these periodically, like in the original, but only after a set number of

» [Nintendo 64] This *Banjo-Kazooie* puzzle involves giving a hard won orange to a cute little chimp.

STAGES OF EVOLUTION:
CRAZY CHRONOLOGY

GAVIN HOOD ON WHY GRUNTY'S REVENGE WAS ITS PREDECESSOR'S PREQUEL

"The only restriction we had was that in an ideal world the story for *Grunty's Revenge* had to tie into the N64 games but not affect them in any way, which was why it was set in between the first game and the second one. That was why Grunty was freed from the rock in *Grunty's Revenge* but ends up back under it. It was so that it didn't really change any of the canon. That was one of the main stipulations. I don't know if that came from Rare or from our team, but we wanted to tie *Grunty's Revenge* into the N64 games as much as possible. We didn't want it to feel like some random side project. We wanted people who played it to realise that it tied in with the earlier *Banjo* games. At the time we were making it there was a lot of conversations at Rare where we said that if it was going to be a part of the *Banjo* storyline then we couldn't do things that didn't make sense of how the other games worked. So we had to be quite clever in how we structured the start, the middle and the end so that while it affected the broader world it didn't actually have any impact on it at all. So everything that happened in *Banjo-Kazooie* and *Banjo-Tooie* would have happened even if the events of *Grunty's Revenge* didn't take place, but they did, and we made that all work out."

» [Nintendo 64] Lunchtime *GoldenEye* sessions at Rare inspired the FPS sections that are found in *Banjo-Tooie*.

musical notes had been collected. Chris puts this down to pacing. "It allowed us to gate certain things, so that when the player had a certain number of notes then they must have done certain things, rather than them just rushing through and getting a new move too soon. So it was forcing the player to do more and complete more of the game before they could proceed. It was probably also the fact that it meant you couldn't shortcut the game if you knew exactly where to go; it meant you had to have a more thorough exploration."

One other novel area of *Banjo-Tooie* was its multiplayer mode. It lacked the adventure of the solo offering, but while Chris considers the N64 ideal for multiplayer he feels it made sense that *Banjo-Tooie*'s implementation focussed on minigames. "The N64 having four controllers was a move by Nintendo to say that the N64 was for multiple players, so *Banjo-Tooie*'s multiplayer could have been to do with that," Chris reckons. "We could have made its minigames less disjointed with cutscenes, but I think it would have been quite challenging to make an *adventure* for the multiplayer because we would have had to design it so that multiple players could play it. If there was a split-screen challenge then it would have been difficult to not have the adventure split-screen too, meaning that the camera would have to pan out quite far."

» [Nintendo 64] There are numerous changes in *Banjo-Tooie*, including Mumbo Jumbo as a new playable character.

» [Nintendo 64] The Jiggywiggy challenges in *Banjo-Tooie* involve making jigsaws against the clock.

» [Nintendo 64] In *Banjo-Tooie* you can split its two heroes up and take them out on solo missions.

» [Game Boy Advance] Despite its 2D visuals, verticality plays a big part in the levels designed for *Grunty's Revenge*.

» [Game Boy Advance] The fun minigames in *Grunty's Revenge* include one where you effectively fish for sheep!

» [Game Boy Advance] *Grunty's Revenge* has third-person shooter sections similar to some *Banjo-Tooie* FPS challenges.

» [Java] *Grunty's Revenge Mobile* is a stripped-back version of the GBA game's adventure.

Although *Banjo-Tooie* was well received when it came out, its development team, led by *Banjo-Kazooie* designer Gregg Mayles, decided against making a follow-up. This task instead fell to Rare's handheld team, which included designer Gavin Hood. "We wanted to get the feeling of a 3D game in a 2D game, but it was quite tricky," Gavin concedes. "We started with something similar to a *Zelda*-style *Conker* game that came out on the Game Boy Color, but we couldn't really do the kind of platforming we wanted. So our lead programmer put a 3D collision mesh inside a 2D engine. Then we used the GBA's layers system to decide what the player went in front of or behind. That was how we managed to get a feeling of height and depth, and jumping across to things."

> "STARTING WITHOUT KAZOOIE WAS MAINLY A STORY CONCEIT. IT WAS TO MAKE GRUNTY'S REVENGE FEEL DIFFERENT, AND ALSO TO MAKE USE OF THE PACK WHACK"
>
> **GAVIN HOOD**

Having achieved pseudo-3D collision detection for their 2D GBA *Banjo* title – *Grunty's Revenge*, the team working on the sequel next borrowed a trick from *Donkey Kong Country* to give their follow-up pre-rendered polygon-based sprites and slick animation. "The big conversation after we had the collision in place was about how we would represent Banjo and the enemies, because we wanted them to feel quite fluid," Gavin says. "There was a lot of work involved in doing that. We did really high-res renders of all of the characters and rendered them out into different frames of animation to get them as smooth and natural as we could in comparison to the 3D *Banjo* games."

In terms of gameplay, *Grunty's Revenge* was an adventure-based platformer like its N64 counterparts, but it had points of difference. Most noticeably, it began with Kazooie getting kidnapped, leaving Banjo on a solo rescue mission for the first few levels. "Starting without Kazooie was mainly a story conceit," Gavin observes. "It was to make *Grunty's Revenge* feel different, and also to make use of the Pack Whack, where you would whack Banjo's backpack in front of him. One of the side effects of Banjo starting without Kazooie was that it allowed us to reintroduce players that had played the original *Banjo* to the moves. Because although a lot of them were the same you accessed them in a different way, or how you used them differed."

An aspect of *Grunty's Revenge* that differentiated it even more from the N64 *Banjo* games was its transformation system. Instead of being offered once on specific levels, all unlocked forms could be chosen when visiting shaman Mumbo Jumbo. "The level designs were structured to take account of you having access to all of those transformations, and certain levels were influenced by certain transformations," Gavin remarks. "So the haunted bayou being set in darkness was influenced by the candle transformation. We could have used the mouse transformation a lot more, because it meant Banjo could fit into lots of places. The mouse could also gnaw through things, and there were tons of puzzles we had planned for that. But we couldn't do them all because then the other transformations wouldn't get their time in the spotlight."

After work on *Grunty's Revenge* was completed, but before it launched, a second GBA *Banjo* title was started. Using an abandoned *Diddy Kong* project as its basis, a team led by Gary Richards began development on a flight racer called *Banjo-Racing*. "*Diddy Kong Pilot* got put in limbo when Rare separated from Nintendo. Then there was a massive gap between when it was *that* and when it became *Banjo-Pilot*," Gary reveals. "We were asked to get the game done as *Banjo-Pilot* because THQ wanted to do a deal where there were multiple GBA games involved. *Diddy Kong Pilot* had a few bits and pieces, so some of the tracks remained pretty much the same as they were originally, but the

STAGES OF EVOLUTION: CHARACTER BUILDING

Q&A WITH BANJO CHARACTER DESIGNER/ANIMATOR ED BRYAN

HOW LONG WAS BANJO A RABBIT FOR?

We went from a boy to a rabbit for about a week. The story is that I'm pissed off because Banjo should have been a rabbit, but he clearly should never have been! I've got old DAT tapes that I used to back-up my work, and I sent a couple of them to be archived. Pretty much everything on them was recovered, and I found the rabbit. I've only shared him with Steve Mayles because the internet would go bananas!

WHY WAS CANARY MARY SO HARD TO BEAT IN RACES?

People still complain about breaking their N64 controller trying to beat that stupid character! My younger brother Will wrote the code for that. He always says that you need to slow down, because the code always tries to be ahead of you. So you need to relax a little bit so that you can blast past her at the end. Every time it comes up I tell people that they want to speak to Will!

WHERE DID *NUTS & BOLTS*' BLOCKY LOOK COME FROM?

First of all there was a project called *Banjo X*, and Steve Mayles and I tried to do high-res visuals for that. We thought that if we made the characters in this blocky style that could be a fun thing to do. It also tied in with this idea that the things that you interacted with would be blocky, because we had this idea that you would build stuff from blocks.

STAGES OF EVOLUTION:

LOST LEVEL

DESIGNER STEVE MALPASS ON NUTS & BOLTS' CUT STAGE

"It was pretty much a trademark of *Banjo* games that each level was its own biome. We had done a fire level, an ice level, a factory level and whatever, so we looked at what we could have in *Nuts & Bolts*. I guess the Wild West was an obvious theme to think of, because we hadn't done that in the first two games. The level had been designed. I would always start with a map, and I've still got that on paper. There was a section of Showdown Town up at the top where there was a seaside area and a pier. There were buildings there, and the doors to Weird West were along there. So I remember sitting with Steve Hurst, the chief environment artist on all of the *Banjo* games, and we would look at this map. The first thing we would do is get an environment, and then we would put a bunch of cubes down. So those would be houses. Then you would get an idea of scale, put a vehicle in it and then drive around to see how long it would take to get from one side to the other. So we got to that stage and then it was the same old story of the game having to come out for Christmas. We were behind schedule and so we had to decide what to cut. Well which level had the least work done on it? And that was my Wild West one."

gameplay structure wasn't there. So a lot of what we did was putting game modes in."

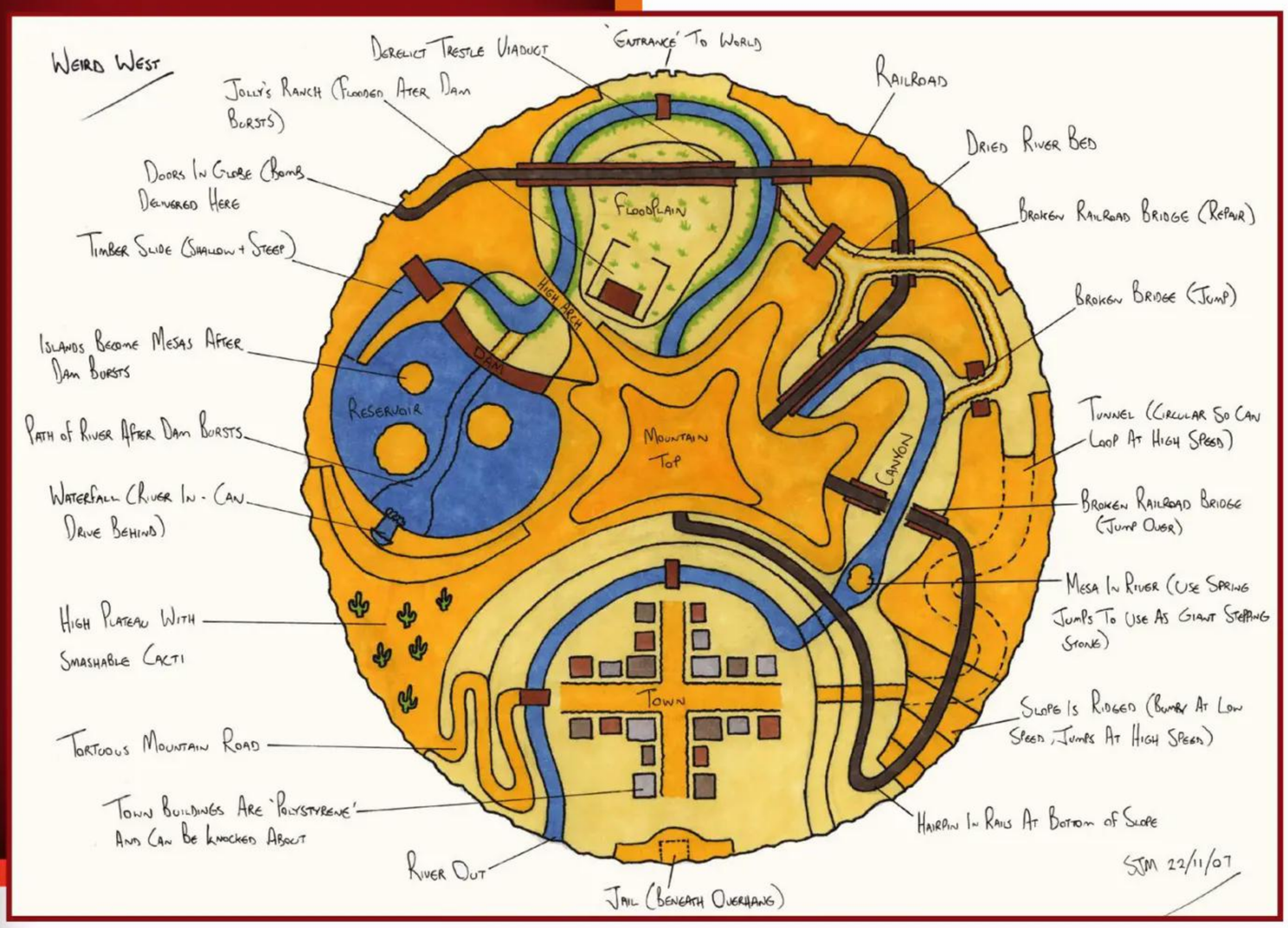
The structure that the *Banjo-Pilot* team implemented included combat with bosses. The inclusion of these was influenced by a Rare title that the Banjo racer was a spiritual successor to, but visual effects took its sky-high boss fights to another level. "Kart racing games like *Diddy Kong Racing* featured boss races, and I think we took inspiration from that," Gary muses. "But we thought about how we could do them with planes, and decided we would make them feel like dogfights. It looked quite cool with the two planes flying over the cloud layers, but it was just using the mechanics that were already there in the cheapest way possible. We had straight tracks in the boss fights that just looped, so they were super simple but were also very effective."

> "WE WERE ASKED TO GET THE GAME DONE AS BANJO-PILOT BECAUSE THQ WANTED TO DO A DEAL WHERE THERE WERE MULTIPLE GBA GAMES INVOLVED"
>
> **GARY RICHARDS**

Given that *Diddy Kong Pilot* was going to be a sequel to *Diddy Kong Racing*, it seems curious that the scrapped GBA title didn't focus on karts like the earlier game. *Banjo-Pilot* retained planes as its mode of transport, but why was flight favoured originally? "The original reason for having planes was that *Diddy Kong Pilot* used a tilt cartridge, because its team thought it would be a cool way to control a plane," Gary discloses. "So planes made sense. Unfortunately, when we lost the *Donkey Kong* licence the tilt cartridge was just getting in the way, because Nintendo wasn't giving us the support. The big problem with tilting the GBA's screen with a racing game was that you couldn't see what was happening, because it was just rubbish when you moved it around."

Other aspects of *Banjo-Pilot* reflected the earlier *Banjo* games. The racer's pick-ups were taken from the previous titles, cutscenes were added to give a sense of an adventure and the two heroes of the series got to settle any scores that they had. "It was especially important to have floating collectables because you had a lot of space since you could fly vertically, and it made players go off the racing line," Gary assesses. "The cutscenes were down to us trying to give the player a reason to do the races. I know the storyline was quite thin, but at least it made a bit of sense of the races. Then we had Banjo

» [Game Boy Advance] Many of the collectables from the N64 *Banjo* games are also pick-ups in *Banjo-Pilot*.


Weird West
Derelict Trestle Viaduct
'Entrance' To World
Railroad
Jolly's Ranch (Flooded After Dam Bursts)
Doors In Globe (Bomb Delivered Here)
Dried River Bed
Broken Railroad Bridge (Repair)
Timber Slide (Shallow + Steep)
Floodplain
High Arch
Broken Bridge (Jump)
Islands Become Mesas After Dam Bursts
Dam
Reservoir
Tunnel (Circular So Can Loop At High Speed)
Path of River After Dam Bursts
Mountain Top
Canyon
Broken Railroad Bridge (Jump Over)
Waterfall (River In - Can Drive Behind)
Mesa In River (Use Spring Jumps To Use As Giant Stepping Stone)
High Plateau With Smashable Cacti
Town
Slope Is Ridged (Bumpy At Low Speed, Jumps At High Speed)
Tortuous Mountain Road
Town Buildings Are 'Polystyrene' And Can Be Knocked About
Hairpin In Rails At Bottom of Slope
River Out
Jail (Beneath Overhang)
SJM 22/11/07

» [Java] The mobile title *Grunty's Revenge Missions* consists of minigames from the GBA *Grunty's Revenge*.

and Kazooie in a dogfight just because we had two player characters, so why not?"

Like *Grunty's Revenge*, *Banjo-Pilot* received solid reviews. Soon after its release, three Xbox 360 projects were begun, including remakes of the N64 originals, as *Banjo* coder Chris Sutherland remembers. "I wasn't involved directly with the Xbox 360 releases, but I know [the games] went to 4J Studios in Scotland, and they did a lot of the work for those. They did an amazing job. They made the Stop 'N' Swop system work so that the two *Banjo* games worked together. You could get the Ice Key and the other things from the Stop 'N' Swop and they would actually work together. They did a load of other things as well."

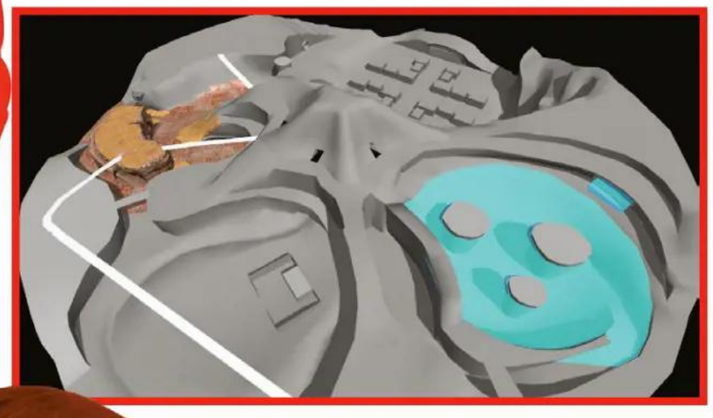
The studio trusted by Rare to update the first two *Banjo* games for the Xbox 360 naturally updated the N64 titles' visuals, but as Chris points out, it also addressed minor complaints that players had about certain aspects of the originals' gameplay. "The framerates were a lot better, and the Xbox 360 versions were recompiled with updated textures. There were also improvements to the camera and controls. Another thing that 4J did was to improve the level of detail when you were close to things without things popping in. And in the original *Banjo-Kazooie*, if you tried to collect all 101 notes on each level and died you had to go back and collect them all again. 4J Studios took that requirement away in the Xbox 360 version." ▶

» [Game Boy Advance] *Banjo-Pilot* started off life as a *Diddy Kong Racing* game, but changed when Rare left Nintendo.

» [Game Boy Advance] *Banjo-Pilot*s multiplayer mode supports up to four players using link-up cables and multiple cartridges.

» [Game Boy Advance] As well as Banjo and Kazooie, *Banjo-Pilot* lets you race as Mumbo Jumbo and other *Banjo* characters.

» [Xbox 360] The vehicle construction aspect of *Nuts & Bolts* wasn't originally intended for a *Banjo* game.



» This low-level render of the cancelled *Nuts & Bolts* level Weird West is as far as the world got.

The third Xbox 360 *Banjo* project went through almost as many iterations as *Dream* had. Steve Malpass worked with Gregg Mayles on the design for *Nuts & Bolts*, as it was ultimately called, and he explains how a Rare founder gave it its core concept. "There was quite a wait because it changed direction a few times, before eventually Tim Stamper had the idea of a virtual Lego set to allow players to build vehicles," Steve comments. "It was decided that we merge that idea with *Banjo* somehow. We had the first level of *Nuts & Bolts* – Mumbo's Mountain – and we put these vehicles in it. We then adapted the layout to accommodate them, so we had ramps and that sort of thing. Then we needed to make some kind of 3D editor user interface, which was a nightmare!"

Having worked out how to allow players to build 3D vehicles, work started on a hub environment called Showdown Town that Banjo could walk around, although there would be less walking and more driving in the game's eclectic worlds. "Showdown Town was the part of the game that was most like the previous games; that was where all the platforming was," Steve reviews. "There *were* moments in the worlds where you would have to get out of the vehicle to put things in them, but the on-foot stuff there was pretty much limited to that. Showdown Town was divided into sections, but rather than having very obvious paths connecting them, the boundaries between them were quite blurred – much like a real town."

» [Xbox 360] In the *Nuts & Bolts* missions you typically drive, but you're on-foot more in the game's hub.

The *Nuts & Bolts* team called its challenge-filled levels 'worlds', and like real worlds they were spherical, although Banjo visited the inside of them rather than their surfaces. Steve puts their spherical shape down to that being the most fun option. "We designed the challenges with the thought that you had to navigate the worlds with a vehicle, and since they were set inside globes everything was circular. The whole 'game globe' idea came together during the design of Showdown Town. We wanted players to get an object from a dispenser, and then transport it to something. But what shape should the object be? Well obviously a ball, because it would be tricky to transport and would roll around if you dropped it. So as the worlds were contained in balls that meant they had to be circular."

> "WE HAD THE FIRST LEVEL OF NUTS & BOLTS – MUMBO'S MOUNTAIN – AND WE PUT THESE VEHICLES IN IT. WE THEN ADAPTED THE LAYOUT TO ACCOMMODATE THEM"
>
> **STEVE MALPASS**

As well as challenges and exploration, the core gameplay in *Nuts & Bolts* rewarded players with abilities – much like the N64 *Banjo* titles. However the Xbox 360 follow-up applied these upgrades in a different way than the original games had. "When you started the game you were in the town square, and you were surrounded by steep slopes, and it wasn't until you had certain vehicle parts like the High-grip Tyres that you could go up them," Steve highlights. "There was also a move where you put a spring on the bottom of the cars that you used to jump over houses or to get to high-up areas. So those abilities were achieved by upgrading your vehicle rather than getting new moves for the characters."

Although the construction element in *Nuts & Bolts* proved divisive on its launch, the sequel certainly had its fans. At the time of writing no further *Banjo-Kazooie* titles have appeared, although Banjo and Kazooie surprisingly both featured as combatants in Nintendo's *Super Smash Brothers Ultimate*, while *Yooka-Replaylee*, the latest in a *series of* spiritual successors to *Banjo-Kazooie*, has just been released. It only seems fair then that *Yooka-Laylee* and *Banjo* coder Chris Sutherland has the last word on Banjo's first adventure. "I think the thing that best stands the test of time is the characters and the repartee between them. That helped to inject more feeling into them rather than them just being token mascots. Graphically I think the game being quite cartoony means that it holds up better than contemporary games that tried to be super realistic. The music also stands up, and I suppose the odd noises that I had Banjo and Kazooie saying have stayed with people for many years. Who knew that was going to be a thing?" ✱

» [Xbox 360] All sorts of driving challenges feature in *Nuts & Bolts*, from speed runs to hectic retrievals.

STAGES OF EVOLUTION: SPIRITUAL SUCCESSORS

CHRIS SUTHERLAND ON THE BANJO-INSPIRED YOOKA-LAYLEE TITLES

WHY DID PLAYTONIC MAKE A SPIRITUAL SUCCESSOR TO *BANJO-KAZOOIE*?

There was still a lot of interest online about *Banjo-Kazooie*. People felt that they needed a new *Banjo* game that was in the style of the first two games. Obviously there was *Nuts & Bolts*, but for a lot of people that wasn't the game that they were hoping it would be. So *Yooka-Laylee* was really to satisfy them. We also had many of the people who had worked on the first two *Banjo* games at Playtonic.

WHY WAS *YOOKA-LAYLEE AND THE IMPOSSIBLE LAIR* 2D?

In the first game we originally had ideas of having 2D sections similar to what you saw in *Impossible Lair*. So then we thought why didn't we tackle that side of things and make something that was *just* 2D? Again, we also had a history where we had a lot of people that had worked on *Donkey Kong Country*, so there was that connection there of trying to do something that was side-scrolling with our characters in it.

HOW DOES *YOOKA-REPLAYLEE* IMPROVE ON *YOOKA-LAYLEE*?

There's more guidance in terms of what you need to do. Then the moves are all available at the same time, and you can chain them together in a better fashion. There's been an overhaul of the art and animation, and a lot of the levels. The bosses have been upgraded and improved. Then in terms of collectables there are a lot more things to discover, and Rextro's got his own top-down 3D adventure.

26 YEARS OF EPIC BATTLES

TOTAL WAR

THE FIRST TOTAL WAR GAME WAS THE BREAKOUT HIT THAT CREATIVE ASSEMBLY NEEDED TO FREE ITSELF FROM ITS WORK-FOR-HIRE SITUATIONSHIP WITH ELECTRONIC ARTS. SINCE THEN THE SERIES HAS GONE FROM STRENGTH TO STRENGTH, COVERING EVERYTHING FROM THE ROMAN EMPIRE AND THE NAPOLEONIC WARS TO SKAVEN AND UNDEAD LORDS

KEVIN MCDOWELL

■ Having been an artist on the *Total War* series since *Rome*, Kevin has since gone on to lead the franchise as art director at the studio.

When all is said and done, *Total War* hasn't really changed in the 25 years it's been around. But that's not a criticism, not in the slightest. No, it's a testament to the inescapable love of watching hundreds of little men hitting each other with swords, of setting up ambushes or initiating a perfectly timed cavalry charge. It's a recognition of the perfect blend of macro and micro, of broader empire management and precise real-time battle tactics. Few gaming franchises can survive so long with their foundational gameplay at the core without a radical makeover, brand reboot or a concerted effort to diversify.

Yet to pay tribute to one of gaming's most iconic RTS games is to also acknowledge the impressive efforts of its creator, who has been at the helm since the very first game in the series, *Shogun: Total War*, released in 2000. Since then it's been adaptable, touching on broader eras of war from the Roman empire and the Age Of Discovery to more focussed periods as seen in *Napoleon* or *Attila*. It's even reached into fantasy having turned the *Total War* series to the *Warhammer* brand, too.

Total War is a formula that has proven to work time and again but as the franchise has evolved, its developer Creative Assembly has grown alongside it. ✱

IAN ROXBURGH

■ *Total War* was Ian's passion even before joining Creative Assembly to handle their PR and marketing for *Medieval*. Over time he switched to design and is now game director.

SHOGUN: TOTAL WAR

PC • 2000

■ The boom of the real-time strategy genre, and specifically *Command & Conquer*, was the very early starting point for what would go on to be *Total War: Shogun*. But with the advent of 3D graphics cards on PCs, Creative Assembly stumbled across a new perspective for the genre. It brought the camera down closer to the ground and, looking out onto the horizon, it was not unlike the same perspective a commander might have had over a battlefield. This changed the scope of the game completely, shifting *Shogun* from what was planned to be a 'risk-free' project intending to capitalise on the popularity of the RTS genre to something much grander in scale.

Further inspirations behind the game came not from videogames, but from Kurosawa movies, the *Shogun* TV series and even Sun Tzu's *Art Of War*. That last one even inspired a gameplay element where birds could be seen flying out of a forest at locations where the enemy were waiting in ambush. The *Shogun* board game was also present in the office, which likely fed into the higher level strategic half of the game which was always intended from the start. With the two pieces of the game feeding into each other symbiotically, *Total War* as we know it was born and history was made.

KEVIN'S MEMORIES

"When I came for my interview at CA, they took me upstairs and showed me a build of *Shogun* running. I guess the novelty of *Shogun* was that with the camera you could see into the horizon, and you're controlling these groups of men, like a proper little war game. In my sketchbook at the time, which I had with me at my interview, I had like a sketch of a game that I would really love to work on, which was pretty much the same kind of game design as *Shogun*, except it was Vikings and Ragnarok. I also have always been a very big fan of Japanese culture and Japanese art and everything. I was like, "My God, I gotta work at this place. This is amazing." So it was kind of awesome to work at this company that was making this cool game even though I wasn't planning on working on it, I was working on sports games."

WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

THE KEY ELEMENTS THAT MAKE UP A TOTAL WAR GAME

COMMAND...

■ Core to the gameplay is the high-level strategic planning and execution of the large-scale battles, where unit type, positioning and strength all factor into your success.

...AND CONQUER

■ The campaign map is where the player must expand and grow their empire in search of resources for stronger armies, advance their technology, or to just defeat opposing powers.

PLEDGE ALLEGIANCE

■ While diplomacy was weaker in the earlier games, it was still important to build alliances, trade resources and generally work to make sure you weren't fighting battles on several fronts.

TAKING AGENCY

■ On top of diplomacy there is the Agent system, which could indeed be diplomats or assassins and spies. In later games princesses could be married off, bishops spread religion, champions boosted morale and so on.

IAN'S MEMORIES

"When I joined the company it was still gonna be called *Crusader: Total War.* And then 9/11 happened. I think George W Bush gave that speech going "this crusade, this war against terror", so we couldn't really call it that."

MEDIEVAL: TOTAL WAR

PC • 2002

■ With *Shogun* having already proven there was a formula here with *Total War*, the next step was to scale up. Creative Assembly could step out of its work-for-hire situation and focus its efforts solely into *Total War*. The sequel used an upgraded engine of the one used in *Shogun*, bringing with it larger unit counts, an improved campaign map and siege combat mechanics among countless other improvements.

The fact that it touched on a much broader and larger expanse of land across a number of cultures and nations enabled a richer and more engaging political element to the campaign map that *Shogun* could only lightly touch on.

ROME: TOTAL WAR

PC • 2004

Development on *Rome* actually began at the same time as *Medieval*, but since the focus here was to transition everything over to the 3D space a new engine was needed. This meant swapping out sprites for full 3D models of units, or switching the *Risk*-style province-based strategy map to something more strategic with free movement across a 3D map. This engine would end up being used by the BBC in a TV series about contestants battling out historic battles, known as *Time Commanders*.

IAN'S MEMORIES

"The initial plan from Lion TV [for *Time Commanders*] was that they wanted the contestants to be geared up with electric shock suits. And if one of their units got killed, they were gonna literally shock them. And I think that would have been a much better show."

WIN AT WAR

THE TRICKS YOU NEED TO SURVIVE AS A COMMANDER

HAMMER & ANVIL

Lock enemy units in place with spearmen, hoplites and the like, then come at them from the flanks with cavalry or shock troops to deal significant damage. Just be wary of the enemy doing the same.

USE THE TERRAIN

High ground is important for your archers, giving them longer range and damage. Swamps will slow approaching enemies, while bridges funnel them towards you. Forests are best suited for ambushes.

SAP THEIR MORALE

If you can overwhelm an enemy to such a point that its units begin to rout, they're temporarily out of the battle and therefore give you time to focus elsewhere. Bringing down generals first is the key.

CHASE 'EM DOWN

If a unit is routing, remember there's every chance that it will return to battle. Keep that in mind so that they don't return to attack from behind. It's best to send some cavalry to run after them and finish them off.

ROME: TOTAL WAR: BARBARIAN INVASION

PC • 2005

While *Shogun* and *Medieval* both had their own *Invasion* expansion packs (*Mongol* and *Viking*, respectively), it was *Rome*'s version with *Barbarian Invasion* that evolved the concept to something worthy of recognition. Where the earlier two had their invading hordes feel more akin to random problems to attend with, the barbarians in *Rome*'s expansion pack could raze cities, settle and migrate to new areas. They felt more like a threat to attend to, rather than a reskinned set of enemies to kill.

It brought with it other elements that added depth to the experience, too, such as how religion could impact diplomacy or how each of the different barbarian factions played differently to one another. Perhaps most interesting however was the time period, with players facing new survival-like challenges as they witnessed Rome collapse on itself.

ROME: TOTAL WAR: ALEXANDER

PC • 2006

While it's not as impactful as *Barbarian Invasion* or *Kingdoms*, this expansion is notable for being the first game in the series to focus on a single historical figure. Furthermore, if Alexander is killed the game will immediately end.

MEDIEVAL II: TOTAL WAR

PC • 2006

Given the time it took to develop the new fully 3D engine for *Rome*, it made sense that *Medieval* also be brought over to benefit from the enhancements and upgrades. In part because those same unit models, environments and animations could be used in whatever came in the future more easily, but because the setting had been so popular it was a good chance to see just how much the engine could give to a broader theatre of war. Perhaps it's a testament to that, then, that *Med II* remains one of the most popular games of the series.

IAN'S MEMORIES

"We were doing a cinematic and we didn't have any sound effects and we needed some for the battle. So a few of us went in with a microphone and we just basically screamed into a microphone. It was just so low-tech back then. We literally used to use the foam of the mouse mats and squish it and whatever for the sounds of bodies. But that low-tech nature of it meant that you had to be creative, right?"

CONQUER THE CAMPAIGN HOW TO PLAN FOR WAR

ECONOMICS 101

Building for income early in the game will give you earlier access to more units and more city buildings and that is critical, but remember that you do need to advance army technology and keep civil unrest low.

EARLIER EXPANSION

It's wise to start expanding as soon as you can, but throughout the game be picky about what you're devoting resources to. Focus on cities that have valuable resources or economic benefits, and don't overstretch your borders.

DIPLOMATIC RESPONSE

Making smart effective use of your princesses, finding out your neighbour's secrets through your agents or just generally trading and making alliances will all be more effective than if you just seek to conquer all who stand in your way.

WE'RE NOT WORTHY

Don't overlook unrest or religion. Early on these are not things to consider, but if you keep that attitude as the campaign rolls on you'll find yourself struggling to hold your cities just through these two factors alone.

MEDIEVAL II: TOTAL WAR: KINGDOMS

PC • 2007

Rather than attempt another *Invasion* expansion, *Medieval II* saw the release of what would later go on to be termed 'campaign packs'. Rather than expanding the core gameplay, *Kingdoms* instead added in four new campaigns to play through, with a host of new maps, factions, units and some unique mechanics to consider.

This covered battles in the Americas with the Spanish conquistadors versus Aztec warriors, Vikings against the British, the Crusades in the Holy Land and the Teutonic Wars with the Northern Crusades. These added a lot of variety, but more than anything else happened to establish a very enthusiastic modding scene that later went on to become the foundation for a large number of the popular modding teams, some of which are still active within the *Total War* modding community even to this day.

EMPIRE: TOTAL WAR

PC • 2009

Development on this one began as far back as the release of *Barbarian Invasion*, but given the large amount of content and the massive tech problem that needed to be solved (naval battles), it's not surprising a new engine was needed. The cost was high though, because while its new gameplay elements and improvements were praised, the game itself did come with a number of bugs on launch.

NAPOLEON: TOTAL WAR

PC • 2010

At this point it's probably fair to say that Creative Assembly was beginning to settle into its groove. The series itself was established and a community around it had formed, and critically the company had grown to a point that it was able to begin to speed up production of its games.

Napoleon was built on the *Empire* engine which helped to speed up its development, but even so a year-long turnaround between mainline releases hadn't been achievable at that point. *Napoleon* was interesting, too, for setting a template for a *Total War* games that were more focussed in scope, not broader campaigns like that of the Crusades or the Roman Empire but instead in the life of important historical figures, in this case Napoleon. It allowed players to explore the decisive moments of one of history's greatest generals, either from the side of Bonaparte himself or one of his rivals at the time.

IAN'S MEMORIES

"We considered the theme: was it going to be commercially viable globally? Is it of interest to enough people? *Empire* is almost like a modern version of *Rome* where you've got Europe and you've got America, so quite a wide range of interest. We thought, "Well, we wanted to add a new feature to the game, naval battles, and this is a great period to do that."

TOTAL WAR: SHOGUN 2

PC • 2011

In the spirit of maximum efficiency, *Shogun 2* was built on *Empire*'s engine. But returning to the series' origins meant a much smaller scale than *Empire*, which actually ended up being a massive boon for the game. It is considered one of the best *Total War* games precisely for its tighter focus, simplified variety of units and a purposeful art design.

KEVIN'S MEMORIES

"Before *Shogun 2* launched, the game was in a mess. Mike Simpson called us up on a Friday and said, "This game is in a mess… I know that you're exhausted, so go home now. But come back with your family, with a blanket, and come back to the studio tomorrow morning… and we're gonna sit and have breakfast together. And after breakfast, then we can work on the game, if you guys want." That for me was the idea that they're not just, 'You work for us.' They care about you."

FULL SAIL AHEAD

VICTORY AT SEA REQUIRES SOME PARTICULAR STRATEGIES

WIND MASTER

Pay attention to the direction and strength of the wind, since using that will give you great mobility on the water allowing you to better position your ships into a more suitable firing position.

KEEP YOUR DISTANCE

Knowing what you're facing also means knowing their firing range and speed. Kite slow ships around the waters while keeping them out of firing distance if you can.

FOCUS FIRE

Unlike the traditional ground battles in *Total War*, naval battles are better suited to focussing on a single unit until it is out of the fight. It's best to focus on an admiral or a powerful ship.

TIME TO BOARD

Boarding a ship is a finisher move, essentially, so you're better to wait until the opposing ship is immobile and your boarding crew will significantly outnumber the enemy.

TOTAL WAR: SHOGUN 2 FALL OF THE SAMURAI

PC • 2012

Released as a standalone expansion pack for *Shogun 2*, *FOTS* was something of an anomaly among *Total War* expansion packs at that time since it didn't require the base game to buy and play it. And, much like the game it was built upon, it has ended up being regarded as one of the best expansions released for the series.

Arguably many of the core elements of *Shogun 2* were still here and unchanged, but what made it interesting was the era that it played in. Rather than seeking to unify Japan as with *Shogun 2*, *FOTS* focussed on the Boshin War, an era of unrest for the country as influence from Western powers caused a split between traditionalists and modernists. Not only did this have an impact on the political aspect of the game, but players needed to choose an affiliation that ultimately led to which units and technology they had access to: cannons and gunpowder, or traditional swords and archers? The tech behind it was so well received, it proved that a 19th century *Total War* game could absolutely work.

TOTAL WAR BATTLES: SHOGUN

IOS • 2012

Like many franchises around this same time, *Total War* was brought over to iPad and iPhone in an attempt to capitalise on the rising popularity of Apple's devices as a gaming platform. The idea behind the *Battles* moniker must have surely been to introduce the series to smaller-scale games that could be released alongside the 'main' games on PC. The first of these used the *Shogun* setting, therefore, which was the most recent release on PC at the time.

It was obvious that the large-scale battles of the series wouldn't ever be ported over successfully to the weaker hardware, so the gameplay differed quite significantly. Hex-based grids, basic building construction and automatic squads of units made the game much simpler than the franchise had ever been before, but that wasn't especially a bad thing. It played to the platform's strengths and was well received for what it was trying to do.

TOTAL WAR: ROME II

PC • 2013

Fans had been calling for a sequel to *Rome* since the original, and now that Creative Assembly had grown, had the tech but also had an understanding of what *Total War* was and could be, an updated version to the original just made sense. Here the goal was to push towards something more cinematic and to give the various factions within the Roman Empire a stronger identity. While Creative Assembly did achieve this, the rocky launch with bugs and other issues impacted what would have otherwise been a suitably grand sequel.

IAN'S MEMORIES

"Once *Rome* was successful and Creative Assembly became a big company, Mike Simpson hired all those really smart guys who knew about coding and all that stuff. And suddenly our team got a lot bigger. It was like, "Wow, you can actually do that?" We could make the game do what we wanted it to do. We were able to add things that we really wanted to have in the game, but we couldn't [previously] because of our small size."

THE PERFECT EXPANSION? WHAT MADE FALL OF THE SAMURAI THE BEST TOTAL WAR EXPANSION PACK?

DECISIONS, DECISIONS

Requiring the player to choose between traditionalism or modernism wasn't just a powerful narrative move given the era, but it had a strong impact on your approach to combat, too.

GUNPOWDER & DYNAMITE

FOTS proved that *Total War* could absolutely work in a 19th century, gunpowder-fuelled setting. The demand for a Victorian *Total War* has yet to be satiated.

WESTERN INFLUENCE

Having the likes of the British and the French meddle with the politics of the campaign map was a chaotic factor to consider, and historically relevant.

STANDALONE

Given the overall package available here, *Fall Of The Samurai* absolutely could stand on its own. In fact, some players actually preferred it to the base game, *Shogun 2*.

TOTAL WAR: ATTILA

PC • 2015

In the past, *Attila* might well have been little more than an expansion pack akin to *Barbarian Invasion*. But after the success of *Napoleon*, it was clear there was scope to reuse the updated engine that *Rome II* was using for something more targeted in its scale. The 'horde' mechanism had proven popular in the past, too, so a game built entirely around the idea gave *Attila* a lot more legs (or is that hooves?) that it might have otherwise had.

Here there are many more factors to contend with than just purely defending against the onslaught of the Huns. Instead, factions may be made up of migrating citizens, while changing religions impacts politics. The fertility of a region can even be impacted by a historically accurate mini Ice Age, which again, affects the decisions you make on the campaign map. All of this is presented through a darker, almost apocalyptic tone that added to the feeling of a constant threat from Attila.

TOTAL WAR BATTLES: KINGDOM

MOBILE, PC • 2015

Just three years after the previous *Battles* game, the mobile-gaming market had shifted significantly. Hardware was improved and players had a much broader range of the sorts of games they could play. *Kingdom* is a good representation of this: the fidelity had improved significantly over *Battles: Shogun*, and a richer campaign map element was introduced. The combat style maintained the smaller scale, but even that had deeper options when it came to strategic input.

Bringing some added depth to the *Total War* spin-off was a good thing and likely the reason it was also brought over to PC (with cross-platform functionality, no less), but this middle ground between the two platforms meant it didn't really catch on for either audience and is likely why an announced *Warhammer* equivalent some years later never came to fruition.

TOTAL WAR: ATTILA: AGE OF CHARLEMAGNE

PC • 2015

If the base game of *Attila* had been more like a survival game experience, *AOC* adopted something closer to the traditional *Total War* empire management with its early mediaeval setting. While it was still smaller in scope (it was an expansion pack after all), its tighter focus and more controlled campaign experience removed a lot of the complexities of *Attila* in favour of managing a kingdom through loyalty and religious tensions.

Many *Total War* players were drawn to it for its setting. The different factions and their unique playstyles, the specific goals that they had to achieve and the fact that the expansion was as much about the kingdom meant *AOC* is still thought of as a sufficient stopgap until *Medieval III* is released – which has remained a question for community members since *Medieval II* released all those years ago.

MOD SCENE

THE BEST MODS EVER MADE FROM TOTAL WAR GAMES

THE THIRD AGE

Widely considered to be the best *Total War* conversion mod of any game, *The Third Age* uses *Medieval II* to recreate the intricate warring world of Tolkien's *The Lord Of The Rings*, replete with One Ring powers.

EUROPA BARBARORUM

If *Total War* has never felt quite historically accurate enough, then this mod spanning the ancient world (4th-1st BCE) is for you. It overhauls everything about the base game for an authentically historical game.

THE GREAT WAR

Creative Assembly might never handle the First World War as a setting due to the challenges it faces in making that enjoyable for every kind of player. This mod is there for that niche audience that would adore it.

MEDIEVAL KINGDOMS 1212 AD

This mod turned the systems built for *Attila* into something closer to what fans would want to see from *Medieval III*. It's a sprawling High Middle Ages sandbox there until CA does the job itself.

TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER

PC • 2016

If ever there was a pairing of IPs that made sense, *Medieval* combining with the beloved wargame *Warhammer* was one of them. Games Workshop is inherently built around large-scale battles, so extrapolating that into *Medieval*'s game engine to see thousands of 'minis' duking it out was exciting.

It was the first time that Creative Assembly had properly dabbled with fantasy for a core game, and that brought with it a huge number of changes, tweaks and issues that needed to be addressed. Ultimately it gave CA the chance to have a bit of fun with their engine, and unsurprisingly it was well received.

KEVIN'S MEMORIES

"For a couple of years we'd been wanting to do a fantasy game for a while, and we couldn't decide on which one. We'd had a lot of discussion about what kind of fantasy, and we tried to work with a lot of different licences, a lot of different people. And the only one that worked out in the end was Games Workshop. We were really lucky with that, it took a lot of risk out of the equation."

TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER II

PC • 2017

With only a year difference between the original, *Warhammer II* perhaps caught *Total War* fans off guard having not seen such a direct sequel released by the studio back to back before. In any case, the foundation for the game was already built, and with the sequel Creative Assembly was able to push more strongly on more interesting elements and more diverse variety, with asymmetrical faction playstyles, a narrative-driven campaign map and some more exotic races than the 'standard' fare seen the year prior.

IAN'S MEMORIES

"*Warhammer I* was such a big change in terms of flying creatures and all that kind of stuff. It was using the core engine from *Rome II* but we had to add new stuff and evolve it. But then as soon as you do *Warhammer II*, you're taking an existing art style, an existing engine, and going, "Right. Now we're fine-tuning that. We're adding new features, we're doing new stuff, but you're building on a solid base." It allows you to have a more polished experience."

TOTAL WAR: ARENA

PC • 2018

As a free-to-play multiplayer-only version of the *Total War* series, it's easy to point fingers and call *Arena* a cynical attempt at doing something unnecessarily different for the franchise – but that's never been Creative Assembly's way. While not entirely accurate, perhaps the best comparison is the MOBA genre, since *Arena* was about teams of players playing as specific commanders with unique options available to them to overwhelm and overcome player opponents on the other side.

Many facets of the real-time strategy battles were carried over to *Arena* in terms of unit movement, strategic positioning and all that good stuff, but it was still enough of a reworking to something faster paced and action orientated that it was a hard sell not least because of the free-to-play nature of it. It lasted a year in closed beta before ultimately being closed down.

MAGIC AND MONSTERS

WHAT TOTAL WAR COULD DO WITHOUT HISTORICAL LIMITATIONS

ACTIVE ABILITIES

Now players had lords and special units capable of magic and active skills that they could use to change the course of battle.

FLYING UNITS

Dragons, gyrocopters and harpies added a mobility to the battlefield that needed a whole new level of strategy to consider.

SINGLE-ENTITY UNITS

Exceptionally powerful units represented threats that felt like mini-bosses that needed to be focussed on, which added an epic feeling to their defeat.

ASYMMETRICAL FACTIONS

Factions played in incredibly different ways, not only with the units they had access to but also on the campaign layer.

TOTAL WAR: THREE KINGDOMS

MOBILE, WINDOWS • 2019

There was more to *Three Kingdoms* than just the Chinese setting, adored for its hugely improved diplomacy, the narrative-infused characters and the gorgeous art style. It was one of the highest rated *Total Wars* and beat *Warhammer II*'s active Steam players during launch. This reputation did suffer a dent when fans were disappointed with CA cancelling DLC and long-term support, but a lot of its innovations carried through to later *TW* games.

IAN'S MEMORIES

"The community is always great. The way that they get so behind the game, that they get so involved, that they get so passionate. You feel like they're helping you to make a better game. I love the modding community and that keeps games alive for so many years after the game's been released because they want to play a version of the game that we're not able to make. The excitement and the passion that they have for the games makes me remember my excitement and passion for what I am doing."

A TOTAL WAR SAGA: THRONES OF BRITANNIA

PC • 2018

Total War had often dabbled with the Viking Age and certainly the Vikings had been a regularly occurring faction within the series, but it wasn't until *Thrones Of Britannia* that they came into focus as they were one of the key factions vying for control of the British Isles.

Naturally the scale of the campaign map was significantly smaller as a result, but that was a driving design decision behind the whole game. In fact, its full title was *A Total War Saga: Thrones Of Britannia*, that added *Saga* alluding that this was a much more zoned-in and directed game than previous *Total War* games had been. This had some successes and its streamlined and bloat-free experience did prove that smaller scope projects could work effectively. But that simplicity did come with some drawbacks, not least because of player expectations that were frankly not met in this release.

A TOTAL WAR SAGA: TROY

PC • 2020

Having learnt some lessons from *Thrones Of Britannia*, the latest *A Total War Saga* title focussed on "the truth behind the myth" of the Trojan War in a way that was more obviously not a 'typical' *Total War* experience. Here historical elements of the Bronze Age (the first *Total War* game to do so) were blended with fantastical elements of Homer's epics.

As with the previous *Saga*, it was a smaller and more focussed game that allowed experimentation in ways that could be taboo in mainline *Total War* games. Hero units were capable of special abilities, for example, that significantly impacted a battle, while divine intervention from the likes of Zeus or Aphrodite provided buffs to the player. It straddled the line between realism and fantasy to offer something really quite different.

There's not been another *Saga* game since *Troy*, and in truth they don't garner the same appeal as mainline *Total War* games. But if they are to continue, it could be where Creative Assembly is able to try something different to learn from for the 'proper' *Total War* games.

SECRET WAR

THE RUMOURED TOTAL WAR SETTINGS WE'VE YET TO SEE

AGE OF MYTHOLOGY

Job listings at Creative Assembly suggested something mythical was in the works at the studio. We got *Troy* and *Mythos*, but perhaps this ended up as the *Warhammer* games.

WARHAMMER 40K

Internal testing suggested that CA experimented with cover systems and gun combat with *40K* in mind. We feel it would be a good switch-up after the *Warhammer* fantasy trilogy.

SHOGUN 3

Datamining suggested that files pointed towards the fact that *Shogun 3* was considered for development not long after the success of the second game.

STAR WARS

Rumours and fan-demand have been flying around what is an easy-to-imagine combination of IPs for a long time, but licensing this one would be a major obstacle.

TOTAL WAR: ROME REMASTERED

PC • 2021

Since the franchise typically comes at its most beloved titles with sequels rather than a bit of spit and polish, *Rome: Remastered* is an anomaly. But it's a great choice to remaster, bringing the classic series into the modern era with better graphics, smoother playability and a host of quality-of-life improvements.

TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER III

PC • 2022

The *Warhammer* branch of *Total War* games was always planned to be a multi-game span, and while it's been talked of as a trilogy there's undoubtedly space for Creative Assembly to forge ahead with this one given its popularity. The third game was a culmination of the work done on the earlier games, refining the systems as well as adopting other learnings from non-*Warhammer* iterations too. Not only that but the release of Immortal Empires, a free update for those with all three *TW:W* games, combined every faction, lord and settlement into one gigantic sandbox map for the ultimate fantasy of *Warhammer* conquest.

IAN'S MEMORIES

"[With the *Warhammer* sequels] we're adding new features, we're doing new stuff, but we're building on a solid base. And it's building the base as well that takes a lot of time. The thing is that the base game is a lot of new content and a lot of new things to play. Then the second game, then the third game and then we tie them all together in the final thing. It's all about making the games [graduallly] more polished and more robust."

A TOTAL WAR SAGA: TROY: MYTHOS

PC • 2021

Whether it was intended from the start of Troy's development or not, Mythos was an answer to those complaints of the base game that it didn't really know what it wanted to be. It was true that there were certainly mythical elements to *Troy*, players had hoped that it was either full-on fantastical or rather representing the Trojan War as a po-faced faction management game.

In any case, *Mythos* made sure that wasn't an issue any more. By adding the Mythic Expeditions mode, players could capture or recruit powerful mythological creatures such as Griffins, Cerberus, Cyclopes or Hydras. In a lot of ways it turned Troy into the *Age Of Mythology: Total War* experience that many players had been hoping for in the first place. *Total War* has long been a game of constant iteration, experimentation and – for Creative Assembly especially – a long list of lessons and learnings that the studio can bring forward for future games. Maybe as a result of *Mythos* we really will one day see a main game more strongly tied to mythological battles.

TOTAL WAR: PHAROAH

PC • 2023

The studio had flirted with a more ancient era in *Troy*, but with *Pharaoh* it strongly leveraged it for pure historical conflict. Here though it was less about conquering the known world, and instead explored the fall of civilisation. Dynamic crises like volcanic eruptions, invasions, and civil wars escalated unpredictably and instead emphasised one's legacy rather than mere.

It was always going to be harder to handle a less technologically rich era like the Late Bronze Age and its narrower scope did draw comparisons to the *Saga* titles, but *Pharaoh*'s experimental approach did show that there could be alternatives to the typical empire-building that were equally as compelling and narrative-driven.

While *Pharaoh* is the last in this list, it won't be the last *Total War* game. It is so ingrained within the genre, and its dedicated fans are very much invested. And much like **Retro Gamer** itself, there's still plenty of history to cover.

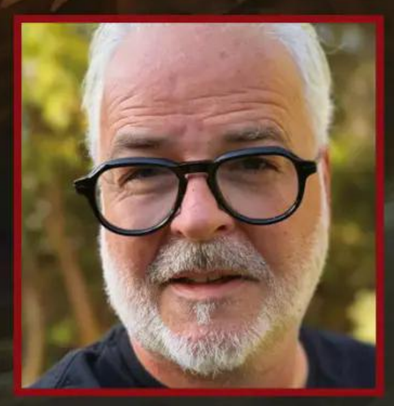
KEVIN'S MEMORIES

"We want to make a strategy game that is super amazing and that people care about, and that's exactly what we get to do. So it's not about making a game, it's about making a good game. That's the best part for me."

THE EVOLUTION OF GOD OF WAR®

INSPIRED BY THE ANCIENT GREECE OF HOLLYWOOD MOVIES, AND WITH NEW REMAKES OF THE FIRST THREE GAMES PLANNED, GOD OF WAR COMBINED BLOODY COMBAT WITH PLATFORMING, PUZZLING AND A RICH NARRATIVE. ITS UNQUALIFIED SUCCESS ENSURED AN EPIC RUN OF SEQUELS, AS SERIES CREATIVES TIM MOSS AND STIG ASMUSSEN EXPLAIN

WORDS BY RORY MILNE



» Tim Moss was technical director on many *God Of War* titles, he most recently worked at Meta.

» Stig Asmussen had a number of roles on multiple *God Of War* projects, he is now CEO of Giant Skull.

There's a long tradition of movie makers using artistic licence when depicting past events, and Sony's Santa Monica Studio embraced this idea of favouring entertainment over historical accuracy when it made its plans for *God Of War*. It envisaged bloody combat being fought by an ashen warrior in an ancient Greece inspired by the silver screen. It imagined a world ruled by merciless gods and plagued by mythical monsters, and in true Hollywood style it wanted its creation to be triumphantly over the top, as the game's lead environment artist Stig Asmussen points out. "The style was Greek mythology meets *Heavy Metal* magazine. We wanted to have that *flair* in the worlds; we wanted the game to feel larger than life," Stig enthuses. "Creative director David Jaffe used to talk about the perception of Greek mythology, and how it wasn't necessarily accurate. It was more from what people had seen, and so the things we built in *God Of War* were more like *Clash Of The Titans* than the ruins in Athens."

God Of War's ancient Greek setting was novel in that relatively few games had explored the period, and it reflected its target market's fascination with the era. This last point made *God Of War*'s worldbuilding easier, but as its lead coder Tim Moss explains completing the project required a Herculean effort. "Greek mythology is super popular in America, so everyone knew who the main characters were, meaning that was one thing less to explain," Tim notes. "We started *God Of War* in 2001, but we didn't start with the idea that it would ultimately take four years. We crunched like motherfuckers. We were young and enthusiastic, and we didn't know any better, so we worked hard and kept moving the deadline. That was the way it got done."

The approach to creating *God Of War* was highly innovative. Aside from debugging, the tools coded for the project allowed the game's artists and designers to create levels and gameplay without input from its programmers. The flexibility of their engine also meant there was very little 'special case' gameplay coding required, as Tim explains. "One of the tricks of *God Of War* was as much as it was a great piece of games design it was also a really good bit of tech," Tim reviews. "We made a very good engine then we handed control of it over to the designers. We gave them the tools and they had to make something cool with them. We used an arts package called Maya as our game editor. All the tools were built into that so the artists and design team could largely make the game on their own. The programmers would just help when something went wrong."

> "THE STYLE WAS GREEK MYTHOLOGY MEETS HEAVY METAL MAGAZINE. WE WANTED TO HAVE THAT FLAIR IN THE WORLDS; WE WANTED THE GAME TO FEEL LARGER THAN LIFE"
>
> STIG ASMUSSEN

The tools created for *God Of War* allowed its designers to realise the bloody combat and gore that they envisioned for the game. Environment lead Stig Asmussen remembers how the look of its warrior protagonist Kratos and the locations he fought in emphasised the graphic nature of his brutal violence. "We had a lot of white marble and we were able to do reflections, so the bloody bodies fell onto things that were stark and that worked as a contrast," Stig recalls. "Kratos himself was white too, so we were able to define the massacre he was creating because he ▶

STAGES OF EVOLUTION: WAR JOURNAL (2005–2007)

THE ORIGINAL, A SEQUEL AND A MOBILE OUTING

GOD OF WAR

Set in an ancient Greece where gods and mythical creatures are real and present dangers, *God Of War*'s bloody combat makes you feel all-powerful until you face an epic boss fight. Challenging platforming, perplexing puzzles and engaging cutscenes nicely punctuate the intense and gory battles.

GOD OF WAR II

As good as *God Of War*'s graphics look, they pale in comparison to *God Of War II*'s sumptuous environments, beautifully rendered characters and impressive effects. The sequel also outdoes the original in terms of its gameplay, boasting many more on-screen enemies and far more boss encounters.

GOD OF WAR: BETRAYAL

It's uncanny how well *God Of War: Betrayal* adapts the combat, platforming and puzzles of the PS2 games to work in a 2D side-scrolling brawler. The Java phone title's visuals are top-notch, it's a riot of blood and gore, and it introduces undead opponents and even emulates quick-time events.

» [PlayStation 2] Epic boss fights are a big part of *God Of War*, and you never know when a boss might appear.

» [PlayStation 2] Precision is essential to making it past some of *God Of War*'s platforming challenges.

STAGES OF EVOLUTION:
WAR JOURNAL 2008–2010

A PSP TITLE, A BUNDLE AND A THIRD CORE TITLE

GOD OF WAR: CHAINS OF OLYMPUS

A prequel to the PS2 *God Of War* titles and a PSP original, *Chains Of Olympus* is a showcase for what Sony's handheld can do. The highly acclaimed release is every bit as cinematic and intense as the PS2 games, its combat is as fluid, fast and furious, and its bosses are as vast and challenging.

GOD OF WAR COLLECTION

Released just a few months before the launch of *God Of War III*, *God Of War Collection* consists of remastered HD ports of the PS2 games for the PS3. The collection would allow PS3 owners who hadn't played the first two *God Of War* games to catch up before playing the third.

GOD OF WAR III

The shift to PS3 with *God Of War III* enabled its creators to realise the full potential of the series. Its in-game graphics are stunning and its cutscenes are worthy of a film. Instead of small groups of foes Kratos faces entire armies, and the game's bosses are the Greek gods themselves.

» [PlayStation 2] There are some seriously heavy duty weapons in *God Of War*, such as the crossbow-like Ballista.

always stood out in it. Kratos being covered in white ash was decided early on. Dave Jaffe [*God Of War*'s director and lead designer] had seen an illustration where lead concept artist Charlie Wen hadn't done the skin treatment yet. So Kratos was still white on the page, and Dave said that was really cool. I don't know if he thought of the ash at that point, but that might have been a catalyst."

> "PEGASUS WAS DIFFICULT BECAUSE IT WAS COMPLETELY DIFFERENT THAN EVERYTHING ELSE. REALLY IT WAS ASKING FOR SOMETHING THAT WAS SLIGHTLY OUTSIDE THE CAPABILITIES OF THE ENGINE"
>
> TIM MOSS

The distinct look of *God Of War*'s player character and the game's cocktail of violent combat, platforming and puzzles proved popular on its release. Thanks to its success a sequel was approved. Its director of technology Tim Moss highlights the challenges of Kratos riding the mythical flying horse Pegasus in the follow-up. "We made *God Of War II* in two years, but really most of the game was finished in the nine months up to its completion," Tim caveats. "We were very time pressured. I mean the crunch was even worse than the first one. So we were working very hard to try to make something good, and Pegasus was one of the new things that we did. Pegasus was difficult because it was completely different than everything else. Really it was asking for something that was slightly outside the capabilities of the engine that we had."

Other aspects of *God Of War II* also tested its engine. The depth and number of boss fights represented a major improvement on the original game. Not only did bosses appear regularly rather than sporadically, but these setpiece encounters involved more complex and multilayered combat, and greater environmental interaction. "The boss scripting was another thing that was really new, that was why we had many more bosses," Tim observes. "I think there were three in the first game, or maybe even just two. The bosses in *God Of War II* got a lot better too, because we put a lot more effort in. Some of them were more like really clever regular enemies, which was not the case in the first game."

As art director on *God Of War II*, Stig Asmussen was involved in making the game more atmospheric through the use of advanced lighting effects. Aside from aesthetic enhancements, his team was also responsible for creating opponents for Kratos in such a way that as many as possible could appear on-screen simultaneously. "We were able to get things like bloom working in *God Of War II*, that changed the look of everything in terms of the lighting," Stig assesses. "It was like if *God Of War* was a ten then we were going to take *God Of War II* to an eleven. So everything was bigger and bolder, and there was more of it, like we designed a lot of the new enemies that we introduced so that you could have more of them on the screen."

Further innovations in *God Of War II* followed as more figures from ancient Greek myths were introduced to the series, and thanks to clever writing these well-known characters were given twists to suit the follow-up's mature themes. New weapons were also created for the sequel, including one that continued its predecessor's celebration of excess. "The Barbarian Hammer was born out of having this large imposing character, and making a hammer that was basically the same size as him!" Stig says with a grin. "Then Kratos using that against the Barbarian King was one of the pinnacle moments of the game. The new characters were born out of Cory Barlog and the writing team's idea of where they wanted to take the story. It was a fun project because it was a major upgrade, and that was something that lived on with *God Of War III*."

Before Santa Monica Studio's third *God Of War* title, the series continued with a PSP exclusive that was set before the original game. *God Of War: Chains Of Olympus* was

» [PlayStation 2] Despite its impressively eclectic gameplay, *God Of War II* is best known for its intense combat.

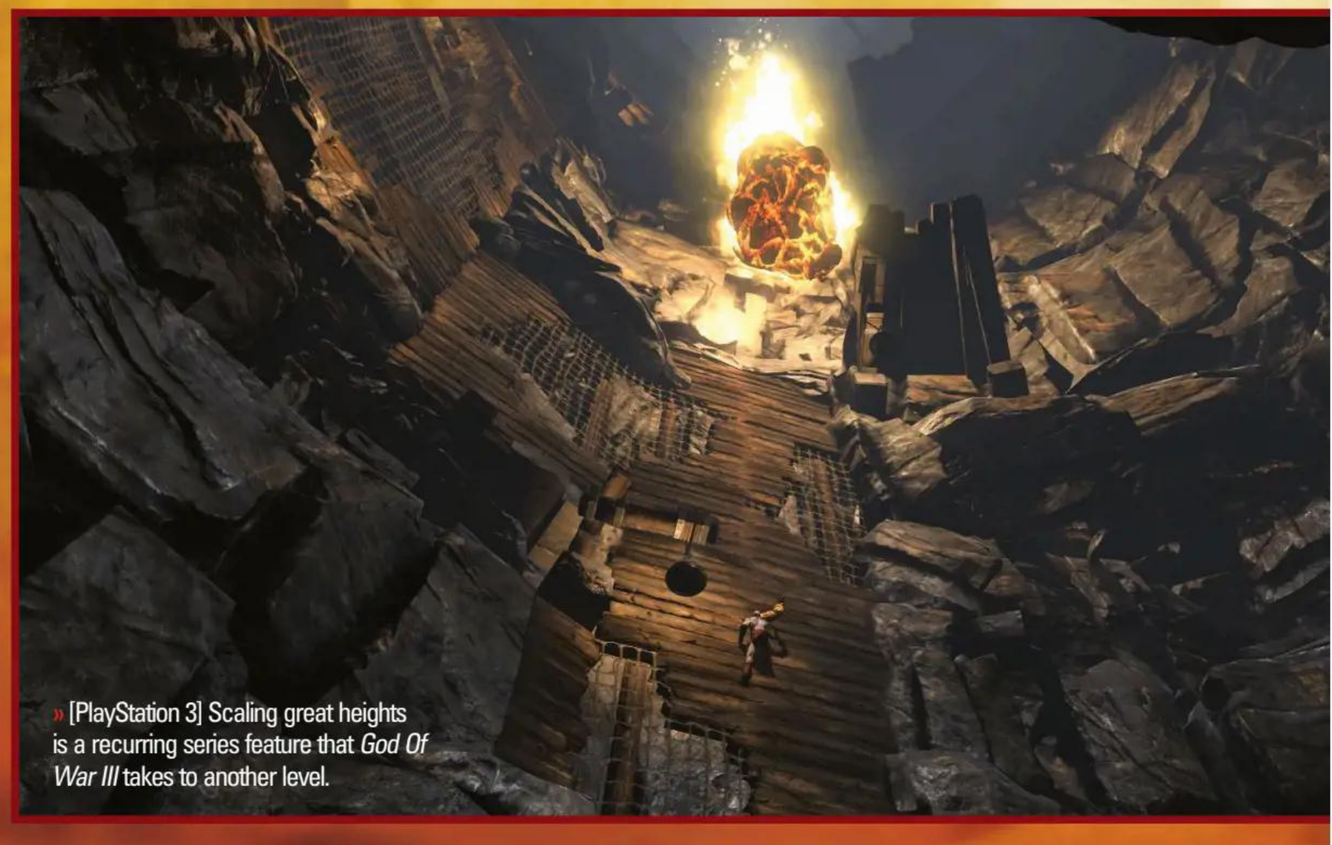
» [PlayStation 2] *God Of War II*'s fiendish puzzles provide a change of pace between the sequel's bloody battles.

» [PlayStation 2] Riding Pegasus over moonlit clouds and into battle adds variety of challenge to *God Of War II*.

» [PSP] Like all early *God Of War* titles, the main weapons in *Chains Of Olympus* are the Blades Of Chaos.

» [PSP] The Persian king in *Chains Of Olympus* has a powerful magic attack that's yours if you beat him.

» [PSP] *God Of War: Chains Of Olympus* has you using a battering ram to bring down the gates of Atticus.



» [PlayStation 3] Scaling great heights is a recurring series feature that *God Of War III* takes to another level.

developed by Ready At Dawn, although senior Santa Monica Studio creatives such as technical director Tim Moss provided oversight. "Ready At Dawn had made the PSP game *Daxter*, and we said let's go talk to this studio about making a *God Of War* game for the PSP with us," Tim comments. "So we started making *Chains Of Olympus*, and some freelance designers who had been working on *God Of War* and *God Of War II* ended up working with Ready At Dawn to try to make sure there was continuity in some key elements of the combat design."

> "IT WAS REALLY IMPORTANT FOR US TO COMPLETE KRATOS' JOURNEY. THERE WAS A GROUP OF GODS, AND HE WAS GOING TO TAKE ONE DOWN AT A TIME"
>
> STIG ASMUSSEN

With *Chains Of Olympus* being an original title rather than a conversion and given that *God Of War III* was years away from release it might have followed to make the PSP exclusive a sequel instead of a prequel. But as Tim explains, there were good reasons for not doing so. "I think *Chains Of Olympus* was made a prequel because *we* were making the sequels," Tim reasons. "We always wanted Ready At Dawn to do something original. To be honest in the beginning we weren't really sure if it *could* have converted *God Of War*, but we were also interested in expanding the franchise and telling some different stories. We felt that a game made specifically for the PSP would be more successful than trying to do a conversion, and I think that was probably a good call."

The near perfect reviews received by *Chains Of Olympus* reflected the fact that it played so well to the PSP's strengths. At this time, its successor *God Of War III* was being developed for the PS3. Its game director Stig Asmussen describes how its narrative shaped the way it played. "It was really important for us to complete Kratos' journey," Stig considers. "He was on a rampage and everyone was against him. There was a group of gods, and he was going to take one down at a time. Each one was a boss, and Kratos was granted powers from each one of them so that by the time he stood up to Zeus and Gaia he would be their worst nightmare. Because by then he would be more powerful than them."

Of course, Kratos wouldn't be starting out as all-powerful in *God Of War III*, but he was capable of defeating hoards of opponents from the beginning of the game. This was fortunate because with the follow-up being developed for the PS3 it was possible to have a screen full of foes. "The number of enemies we could have on-screen at the same time was about 50, and we did have 50 skeletons at once in the game without it going below 60 frames per second!" Stig exclaims. "One of the best ways to exemplify the power curve in *God Of War III* was having Kratos be able to mow through tons of different enemies, but then after that we would have one big bad enemy that was going to give him a meaty fight."

The biggest enemies in *God Of War III* were initially allies. The vast size of the Titans meant that Kratos could move around on them as he did in the game's more traditional stages. Making this possible didn't come without challenges, as the follow-up's director of technology Tim Moss details. "Riding around on those enormous creatures while they moved about, and effectively having them as a level, was a key feature," Tim states. "We probably spent 50% of all of the programming resources making that work, even though it was probably only 35 or 40 minutes of a 14-hour game. It was basically because the designers really wanted it. They were convinced it was going to be worth the technical undertaking, and they were right!"

Of far less technical consideration but of great importance to *God Of War III*'s gameplay was the introduction of a mechanic where

» [PlayStation 3] The button-mashing feats of strength you perform in *God Of War III* continue a series tradition.

STAGES OF EVOLUTION: WAR JOURNAL 2010–2012

ANOTHER HANDHELD OFFERING AND TWO COLLECTIONS

GOD OF WAR: GHOST OF SPARTA

The second PSP *God Of War* title sits between *God Of War* and *God Of War II* in terms of narrative and is nothing short of a technical tour de force. As well as higher-quality visuals it has more on-screen foes and bosses, and it introduces cool new weapons and magical abilities to the series.

GOD OF WAR: COLLECTION VOLUME II

Known as *God Of War Origins Collection* in some regions, *Collection Volume II* contains remastered HD ports of the PSP *God Of War* titles for the PS3. Developed by Ready At Dawn, the studio that created the PSP originals, it's a faithful adaptation with added extras such as Stereoscopic 3D.

GOD OF WAR SAGA

The ultimate collection of pre-reboot *God Of War* games, *God Of War Saga* has the remastered HD versions of the PS2 titles on one disk and *God Of War III* on another. It comes with a voucher to download the remastered HD versions of the PSP games, although the steelbook release has them on disc.

STAGES OF EVOLUTION:
WAR JOURNAL 2013–2018

THE FOURTH CORE GAME, A REMASTER AND A PREQUEL

GOD OF WAR: ASCENSION

Santa Monica Studio's fourth *God Of War* title is a departure for a couple of reasons. It's a prequel to every game that came before it, and it's the first and only *God Of War* game to provide a multiplayer offering. Its solo campaign pits Kratos against goddesses of vengeance known as Furies.

GOD OF WAR III REMASTERED

Released five years after *God Of War III* to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the original *God Of War*, this remastered 1080p HD PS4 title took the third game to new heights of visual fidelity. The PS4 remaster contains all of the DLC created for the PS3 version, and it sold in its millions.

GOD OF WAR: A CALL FROM THE WILDS

A 2D *God Of War* in the form of *Betrayal* might have been an unlikely project, but it was a far more probable release than this short-lived *God Of War* prequel to the 2018 reboot. A text adventure that ran on Facebook messenger, *A Call From The Wilds* rewarded progress with beautifully painted concept art.

▶ players could rapidly swap weapons during battles. Tim regards this feature as defining the combat in the follow-up, and by extension he sees it as a defining aspect of the entire game. "To some degree changing weapons *was* the game; you had to pick the right weapon for the appropriate combat," Tim appraises. "If you were playing with the wrong weapon you were going to lose. The different weapons were good in different scenarios. Did you use the bow to stagger an enemy and make them easier to hit with a bladed weapon? That was where the fun was hidden. It was making people work things like that out when they walked into a room. That was *God Of War III* in a nutshell."

> "THE IDEA WAS TO MAKE A CO-OP GAME WITH TWO CHARACTERS. I THINK IT WAS ABOUT THE TIME WHEN GEARS OF WAR CAME OUT"
>
> TIM MOSS

Some months after *God Of War III* was launched to universal acclaim, a second PSP exclusive set between the PS2 releases came out. As with *Chains Of Olympus*, *God Of War: Ghost Of Sparta* was produced by Ready At Dawn with input from Santa Monica Studio, including technology director Tim Moss. "I'm not sure what the thinking was for *Ghost Of Sparta*'s chronology, but it was probably that by that point we had shipped the first two games, so it was easier since we had established the lore to add more stuff in-between them," Tim contemplates. "Rightly or wrongly there were the main games and the PSP games. The main storyline was being done on the PlayStation and the secondary narrative was being done on the PSP. Truthfully that's what you get when you're the developer of a series. You get to make those choices."

Just as the hierarchy of set-top and handheld *God Of War* releases was clear, the respect between the two studios creating them was unequivocal. As Tim makes mention of, this chimes with players' appreciation for *Ghost Of Sparta*'s originality and it being as highly acclaimed as its PSP predecessor *Chains Of Olympus*. "I think we wanted to keep making the main stories at the Santa Monica Studio, but at the same time we wanted to make PSP games," Tim says of *Ghost Of Sparta*. "They had a really good team at Ready At Dawn, and they really pushed the PSP probably harder than anyone else. The audience wanted this follow-up, because they were happier with an original title than with a conversion."

» [PSP] This boss-fight with a sea serpent is typical of the cinematic setpieces in *Ghost Of Sparta*.

» [PSP] Like earlier *God Of War* games, *Ghost Of Sparta* has plenty of shimmying along ledges in order to get to new areas.

Rather than a follow-up, the subsequent PS3 release *God Of War: Ascension* was a prequel to the original PS2 title. As with its predecessors, *Ascension* had platforming and puzzles to complement its combat, but unlike them it also had online multiplayer. This was initially intended to be local co-op, as its director of technology Tim Moss explains. "The idea was to make a co-op game with two characters," Tim reflects. "I think it was about the time when *Gears Of War* came out, which you could play almost like you were walking down two sides of a corridor. A lot of people were playing it, and we thought we could do something similar. So we started off with this idea, but then it ended up with us making a peer-to-peer fighting game, and that took up a lot of engineering time."

In addition to being time consuming, delivering the code for *Ascension*'s online multiplayer offering was also challenging. It turns out there's a reason why third-person shooters often have multiplayer and third-person hack and slash titles don't, as Tim and his team of coders found out. "It didn't work as well as we wanted," Tim acknowledges. "Melee combat depends on the sword feeling impactful when it hits someone, and it's really difficult ▶

» [PlayStation 3] The big bads in *God Of War: Ascension* are three goddesses of vengeance known as Furies.

» [PlayStation 3] *God Of War: Ascension*'s dimly lit Prison Of The Damned is home to horribly mutated prisoners.

» [PlayStation 3] Large insect-like creatures plague Kratos in *God Of War: Ascension*, but they're easily crushed.

» [PC] Useful new abilities can be learned in the new *God Of War* by examining environmental features.

» [PC] An important element of *God Of War* is that protagonist Kratos now has a son to take care of.

» [PC] Kratos has an enchanted axe at the start of *God Of War*, but he gets his blades back later on.

» [PlayStation 4] Kratos has to navigate his way around a hub world called the Lake Of Nine in *God Of War Ragnarök*.

to make that feel convincing in a multiplayer environment. So we spent the vast majority of our engineering time trying to make the multiplayer work, and ultimately people played the single-player game that really hadn't taken as many forward leaps as the previous games."

By comparison, the title that followed *Ascension* took some major leaps forward. The *God Of War* from 2018 saw an older Kratos raising his son as much as raising hell, although naturally the pair were forever being drawn into conflict. As development support on the game, Tim is well placed to explain this evolution. "Cory Barlog the director for *God Of War II* came back to the studio," Tim recollects. "He had been working with George Miller on the latest *Mad Max* movie, and he came back with a whole bunch of inspirations. He wanted to do something completely different with Kratos. We were all growing up, and making something with mature themes seemed interesting. So Cory in particular had this idea about this father/son relationship."

> "WE WERE ALL GROWING UP, AND MAKING SOMETHING WITH MATURE THEMES SEEMED INTERESTING. SO CORY IN PARTICULAR HAD THIS IDEA ABOUT THIS FATHER/SON RELATIONSHIP"
>
> TIM MOSS

Platforming challenges and challenging puzzles remained part of the 2018 game, but instead of an ancient Greek setting and chained blades Kratos wandered the Norse lands of old and favoured a throwing axe. Tim notes how the reboot's weapon became an option because of the game's lack of camera cuts. "The main myths we looked at were the obvious ones: Egyptian and Norse," Tim remembers. "Norse was picked because actually it was familiar but *not* familiar. I think the plan was to do Egyptian at some point. The axe would never have worked in the previous *God Of War* games with their fixed camera positions, because half of it was about targeting the environment. So with new decisions about how the control mechanics worked came new decisions about things like the weapons."

It speaks volumes that *God Of War* ultimately became one of the best-selling PS4 titles. Naturally a follow-up was developed that continued Kratos and his son's journey through Norse mythology while building on its predecessor's gameplay. In *God Of War Ragnarök*, the ashen warrior gained access to a magic spear, and there were new ways for him to defend himself and attack opponents using his shield.

Aside from boasting new enemies and mini-bosses based on mythical Norse figures, allies of Kratos would come to his aid in *Ragnarök*. Other innovations included Kratos's son Atreus becoming the player character in some parts of their mission. Then of course that mission to save the Norse realms from the existential threat of *Ragnarök* added further differentiation from the 2018 game.

When reviewing the original *God Of War*, Santa Monica Studio's former lead coder and technical director Tim Moss only has praise, and he singles out another *God Of War* title. "I think *God Of War* is a great piece of engineering and I'm very proud of it, but I'm most proud of the third one," Tim qualifies. "We made a really great game, and I'm proud I got to make something that will probably outlive me."

Environment lead, and art and game director on the series Stig Asmussen has similar thoughts. "*God Of War* is a blast, and it's amazing how well *God Of War III* holds up," Stig offers. "So I think the *God Of War* games are going to stand the test of time and influence things going forward for a very long time."

And with the recent release of *Sons Of Sparta*, the incoming *God Of War Laufey* and the first three games all being remade, *God Of War*'s legacy looks set to continue for a long time to come. ✱

» [PlayStation 4] The Norse end days depicted in *God Of War Ragnarök* involve combat with some wild and wonderful creatures.

STAGES OF EVOLUTION: WAR JOURNAL 2018–2023

A REBOOT, THE LATEST CORE TITLE AND ITS DLC

GOD OF WAR

While not a complete reinvention of the franchise, the 2018 reboot sees an older, wiser Kratos raising his son. He's in the Norse lands of old rather than ancient Greece, and instead of chained blades he has an axe that returns when thrown. However his battles are epic and bloody as always.

GOD OF WAR RAGNARÖK

The sequel to the 2018 title continues its story with the coming of the existential event of Norse legend Ragnarök. While retaining the combat, puzzles and role-playing elements of its predecessor, *Ragnarök* ups the ante with new weapons and making Kratos' son a playable character at certain points.

GOD OF WAR RAGNARÖK: VALHALLA

This *Ragnarök* DLC Roguelite lands Kratos in the Norse afterlife of Valhalla where he seeks to make peace with his past transgressions in ancient Greece. His path to redemption takes the form of a series of combat-focussed trials against mythical opponents from Norse and ancient Greek legends.

The Legacy Of SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS

» [PlayStation 2] Diverse tactics are required to take down each colossus – in this case, flames.

TWENTY-ONE YEARS AGO, SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS STUNNED PLAYERS WITH ITS BREATHTAKING SENSE OF SCALE. IMMENSE ENEMIES AND WIDE-OPEN LANDSCAPES MADE IT AN UNFORGETTABLE CLASSIC. WITH FUMITO UEDA AND OTHERS CONNECTED TO THE GAME AS OUR GUIDES, WE EXPLORE ITS CREATION AND ENDURING LEGACY

WORDS BY GRAHAM PEMBREY

A theme of companionship runs through the works of Fumito Ueda. In *Ico*, released in 2001 for the PlayStation 2, players guide an ethereal girl by the hand through an ancient world. In *The Last Guardian*, released on the PlayStation 4 in 2016, a close bond forms throughout the game with a giant animal. Between those two came *Shadow Of The Colossus*, the seminal, awe-inspiring action adventure that is now 21 years old, in which there is a sense of companionship with both the girl you are trying to resurrect from the dead, and to some extent, the giant creatures which you must destroy to achieve that goal.

"There are many different directions in which computers can be used for expression – visuals, special effects, and so on. Among these, what I chose to focus on was character expression," Ueda reflects when we ask about this running theme. "In particular, I was interested not in the protagonist, but in how NPCs could be made to feel compelling to players – that was where I saw real potential. More than the characters directly controlled by the player, it was the portrayal of these companions that became one of my central themes in creating videogames."

By early 2002, *Ico* had proven to be a critical success, if not necessarily a huge commercial one. Ueda and his team, working within Sony Computer Entertainment Japan under the name Team Ico, had various ideas about how they might have greater impact with their next title. "After *Ico*, I considered several different directions," Ueda recalls. "One was an online game where players could co-operate with each other, another was a game using a touch panel for more intuitive interaction, and the third was an immersive experience using a head-mounted display. Among these, the idea I had been nurturing the longest – an online co-operative play experience where players challenge a giant being, like a colossus – eventually evolved into *Shadow Of The Colossus*."

You can find traces of the (ultimately discarded) multiplayer idea in a short prototype film that Ueda and his team created to set out their vision. In the film, three horse riders pursue an enormous creature. Watching it now, one notable difference from *Ico* is the wide-open landscape. "Since *Ico* was a game set within the confines of a closed castle, I wanted the next project to convey the experience of galloping across vast grasslands on horseback, almost as a reaction to that," Ueda explains. "More than focussing on the function of the field, I wanted players to feel its atmosphere. I think that desire is what gave birth to such a wide-open world." That stark and beautiful setting, the Forbidden Lands, persisted from the prototype into the final game, as of course did the core concept of battling vast monsters.

> "WE WANTED A SILLY CHARACTER AND CONSIDERED A DINOSAUR"
> **FUMITO UEDA**

In the finished release there are 16 colossi to defeat as part of your quest to resurrect Mono, the young woman whom your character, Wander, carries into a shrine at the game's start. But Team Ico originally planned to create many more creatures. In the official Japanese art book for the game, Ueda revealed there were originally 48 planned, which was later reduced to 24 and then the final number. The art book shows eight of these unused colossi, including a spindly spider-like monster and a fire-breathing phoenix. This process ▶

FUMITO UEDA

■ Fumito Ueda is the creator of *Ico*, *Shadow Of The Colossus* and *The Last Guardian*, and founder of the studio genDESIGN.

RORY LITTLE

■ Senior character artist Rory Little worked on *Shadow Of The Colossus* during his time at Sony Computer Entertainment Japan.

JOE HOUSTON

■ Senior software engineer Joe Houston worked on the PlayStation 4 remake of the game while at Bluepoint Games.

MICHAEL LAMBERT

■ Also known as Nomad Colossus, Michael has amassed more than 75k YouTube subscribers for his work documenting hidden aspects of the game.

IN THE KNOW

» **PUBLISHER:** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT

» **DEVELOPER:** TEAM ICO

» **PLATFORM:** PLAYSTATION 2

» **RELEASED:** 2005

» **GENRE:** ACTION

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

ICO (PICTURED)

PLATFORM: PLAYSTATION 2

RELEASED: 2001

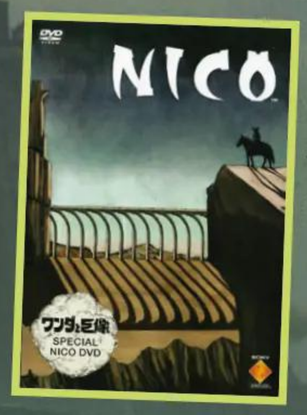
THE LAST GUARDIAN

PLATFORM: PLAYSTATION 4

RELEASED: 2016

CRAFTING NICO

HOW AN EARLY PROTOTYPE DEMONSTRATED TEAM ICO'S VISION



Just as they had done for *Ico*, Fumito Ueda and his team created a cinematic prototype film early in the development of their next game. Opening with three horse riders galloping into battle, the movie sees these horned figures coordinate to bring down a massive colossi.

At this stage, the game was still known as *Nico*, and the intention was to create a reference point which the team could develop into a multiplayer experience. Alluding to the prototype, Ueda tells us, "One of my early ideas was to let players ride alongside each other on horseback, and to realise that, I needed landscapes that stretched all the way to the horizon."

While many aspects of the demo changed significantly in the final game, it acted as a template for the development team and helped them to pitch the concept to Sony. The film was included as a bonus DVD for those who preordered the game in Japan, with DVD extras including screenshots of the work-in-progress material. The film is also an extra for the PlayStation 3 remaster, with added developer interviews, including with producer Kenji Kaido who comments, "We saw the initial concept video and knew that Ueda-san would create another great game."

"IT FELT INAPPROPRIATE TO USE TRIUMPHANT FANFARES EACH TIME AN ENEMY WAS DEFEATED"
FUMITO UEDA

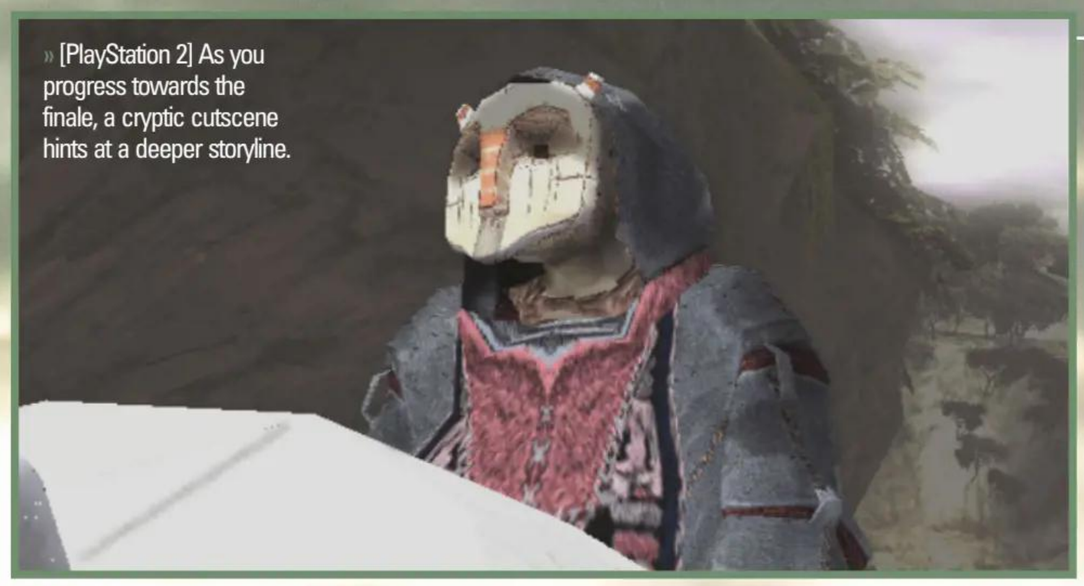
of whittling down the bosses resulted in 16 diverse giants that are truly awe-inspiring to fight against – so much so that there is a sense of tragedy about killing them. That sense is heightened by a mournful musical motif that plays at the end of a battle, each time a giant crashes to the earth. We wonder how Ueda expected players to feel after these encounters? "In truth, I wasn't aiming for players to feel any specific emotion in particular," he replies. "However, since the protagonist's goal – to resurrect someone who had died – was an immoral one, it felt inappropriate to use triumphant fanfares each time an enemy was defeated. That sense of wanting to avoid such dissonance, along with my desire to keep the story from becoming too predictable, ultimately shaped the expression you see in the game."

By the time *Shadow Of The Colossus* was released, the PlayStation 2 was more than five years old, and yet Team Ico was chasing many technology-pushing ideas. Were there any concepts that had to be dropped during development due to the constraints of the hardware? "There wasn't anything we had to abandon because it couldn't be realised on the PlayStation 2," Ueda replies. "In fact, I feel we were pushing the hardware to its very limits – perhaps even to the point of going too far." Playing the original game today, this does feel apparent. Above anything else, the game feels like a masterpiece for a work of the time. During boss battles, you can sometimes hardly believe the encounters are possible on the PS2.

Equally, as Ueda alludes to, there are signs of the hardware being stretched, such as framerate lulls that can occur during more frantic moments of action. And yet there is just so much to be impressed by. One of the great technical feats of the game is a mechanic Ueda and producer Kenji Kaido referred to in interviews as an 'organic collision defamation' system, which allows players to realistically scale and clamber across the giant colossi as though they were traversing solid ground. In an interview with the website Kikizo, Kaido described how the team needed to treat the colossi as "part building, and part living creatures".

Another technical feat from Team Ico was honing the behaviour and movements of your trusty steed Agro. Among those who helped achieve this equine excellence was senior character artist Rory Little. "I joined Sony Computer Entertainment Japan around 2004 or 2005, ostensibly to work on an *Ape Escape* title, but found myself helping out on pitch documents, as I had the broad range of skills that entails," Rory tells us. "During my time on the PS3 launch title *The Eye Of Judgement*, I got briefly shifted onto *Nico* as it was named in development. 'I-co': first child; 'Ni-co': second child," Rory explains about the working title for the game. A veteran of Team17, Rory was called in for his expertise in using LightWave 3D, an animation software Team Ico insisted on using, despite a software called Maya starting to take over in the wider industry by that point. In past interviews, Ueda has spoken about how one of his first forays into the videogame industry was teaching himself to use LightWave 3D after graduating from art school.

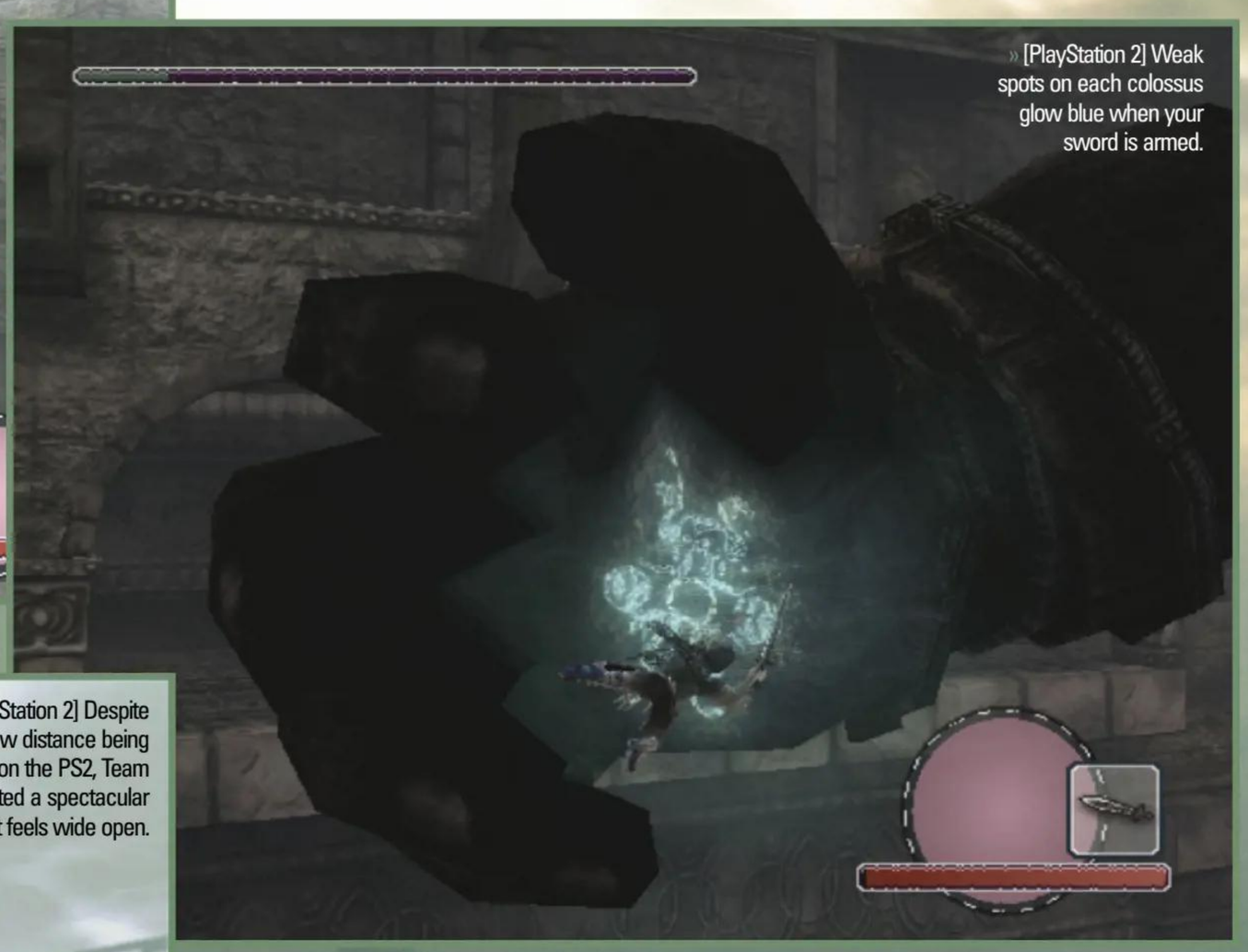
After starting on the project, Rory was tasked with tackling a specific problem concerning how smoothly Agro was moving around the landscape. He tells us there are some complexities with animating a moving horse, which requires two intertwining animations: applying a walk, canter or gallop motion to the animal, then simultaneously moving it from one point to another. "That results in what at first appears to be a good-looking animation, but on closer inspection it shows the hooves sliding around on the ground while they're in contact," Rory explains. "I fixed this by overriding the cycling motion with my own



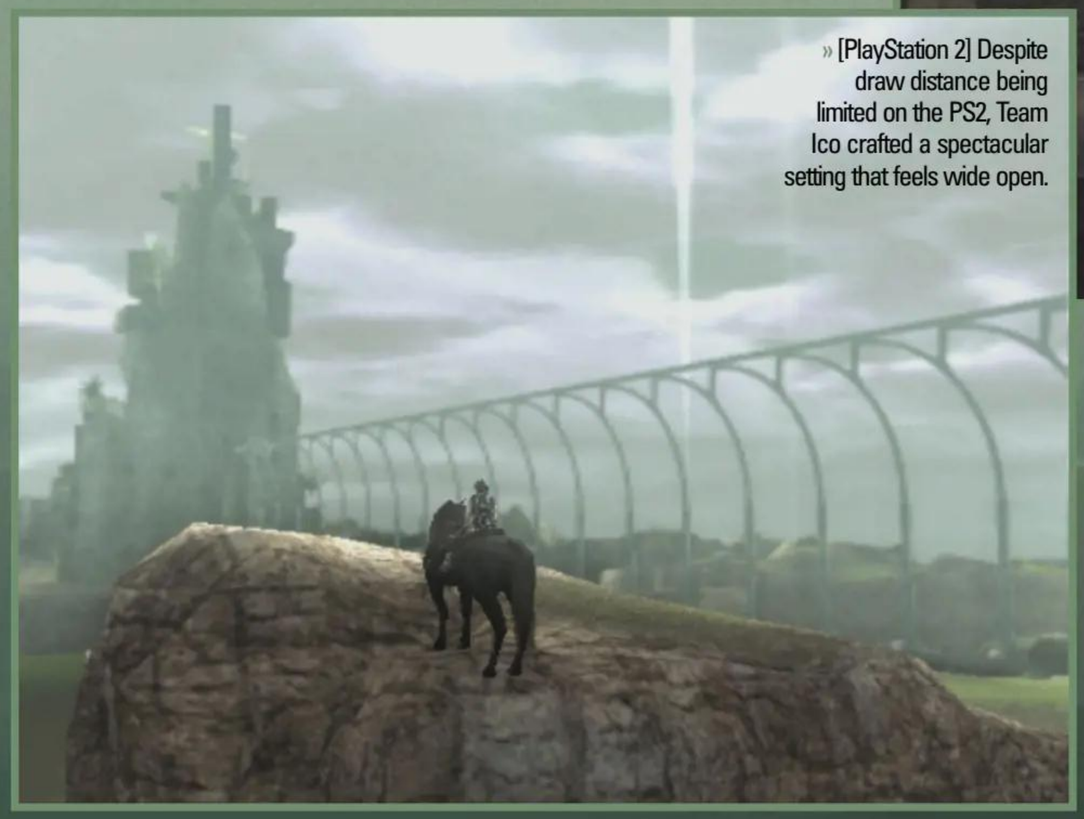
» [PlayStation 2] As you progress towards the finale, a cryptic cutscene hints at a deeper storyline.

» [PlayStation 2] As mournful music plays, killing these magnificent creatures may spark a sense of guilt.

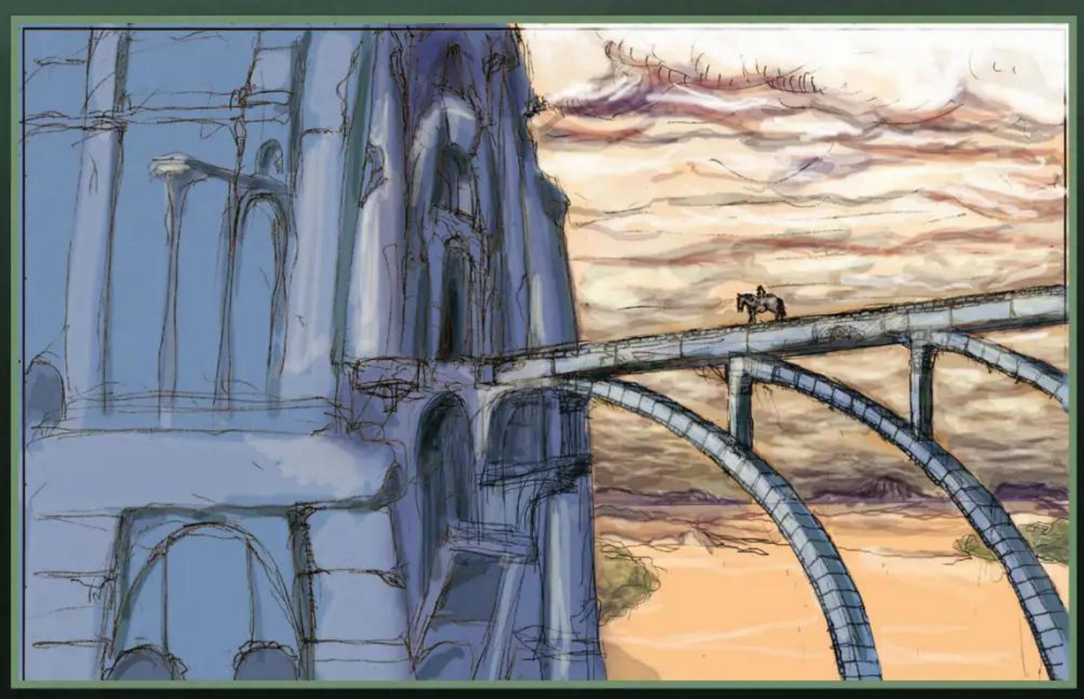
[PlayStation 2] Linger long enough without making progress and gentle hints will appear.



» [PlayStation 2] Weak spots on each colossus glow blue when your sword is armed.



» [PlayStation 2] Despite draw distance being limited on the PS2, Team Ico crafted a spectacular setting that feels wide open.



COLOSSAL COMPOSITIONS

WHY THE EPIC SOUNDTRACK IS SO REVERED

■ Vast landscapes, gigantic monsters and tender companionship – all of these are part of the huge emotional journey *Shadow Of The Colossus* takes players on, and none of it would be quite so hard-hitting without the evocative soundtrack. Created by the film and game composer Kow Otani, who was shown the *Nico* demo by the team to help him understand their vision, the 42 tracks of orchestral music are sublime.

Team Ico weaved these sounds into the game in a dramatic, dynamic way. In an interview video released by Sony to coincide with the PS4 remaster of the game, Otani poignantly commented, "The music feels like you might have saved someone you love, but you couldn't save everyone you loved. For example, in the track *End Of The Battle*, you would think the music would be triumphant after winning. But as a whole, this soundtrack has more in common with a prayer or a requiem."

The soundtrack, titled *Roar Of The Earth*, was released on CD in Japan shortly after the original game was released. It's also currently available on some streaming platforms, and a remastered double vinyl release is available to buy from iam8bit.

» [PlayStation 2] Beams of light from your sword guide the way to the next enemy.

» [PlayStation 2] This reminds us of *Journey*, one of many games whose makers cite *Shadow* as an influence.

» [PlayStation 2] Clambering up a moving creature whilst managing your stamina gauge is half the battle.

▶ animation that used inverse kinematics. It let the hooves be unaffected by the other animation motions, meaning they could be positioned independently." Looking at how realistically Agro reacts both within the game and in cutscenes, this careful work to fine-tune the mare's movement clearly paid off.

Although his time with Team Ico was brief, Rory has fond memories of working with his Japanese colleagues and observed a good working culture in the team. "I chatted with the team and was friendly with them, and my seat was near their area in the open plan design of our floor," he says. "The game holds a special place in my memory. It represented a very happy time, where I was excited to be growing in skill and language facility too, as I worked with my hugely talented Japanese colleagues and got dragged by them to the izakaya drinking holes, to expand my culinary and beverage vocabulary and waistline."

Aside from those eventful outings, Rory is keen to reflect on how special the game was. "It stood out for having a unique game mechanic and unusually strong emotional and narrative beats. Furthermore, the fur and feathers technical solutions developed for the series were ground-breaking and very visually impressive." We should also share that Rory has a good story about another artist working on the game. "She chose to quit the game industry after *Shadow* was put to bed, and pursued a career in shoe design, spending a little time in Britain studying leatherworkers. 'Cobblers!' you might say, but it's true!"

While the art team was hard at work finalising graphical flourishes, the name of the game was also being polished. It was late in

BOSS RUSH

FANTASTIC BEASTS AND HOW TO FELL THEM

MINOTAUR A

■ "Thy first foe," as the shrine spirit introduces it, towers above a cliff. Its internal, developer nickname was Minotaur A.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

Bring the colossus to its knees by stabbing a weak spot on its left leg. Ascend its back, then attack the sigil on its head.

MAMMOTH

■ Lurking in a seaside cave, this quadrupedal colossus will rear up and attempt to crush you and your horse Agro.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

Whilst it rears, shoot an arrow at the underside of a hoof. Once it's slumped, clamber up its fur, watching your stamina, and target the head.

KNIGHT

■ One of the tallest colossi in the game, this behemoth stands in a circular arena wielding a long pillar of stone.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

Provoke it into attacking, then jump onto its club and make the long way up to find a weak spot at the very top, and start stabbing.

KIRIN

■ This scaled beast emerges from the fog resembling a Kirin, the creature from Eastern folklore mixing dragon and horse features.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

Lure the beast to one of the nearby tunnel entrances. As it searches for you, sneak out from a different entrance and climb its tail.

» [PlayStation 2] Pray beside a fallen colossus to fight them again in the sepia-tinged Reminiscence Mode.

» [PlayStation 2] The enormity of each colossus was breathtaking in the PS2 era, and remains so today.

» [PlayStation 2] Plunging your sword into a giant brings spurts of jet-black life-blood.

2004 when Sony changed internal references to *Nico* to its final, intentionally fairytale-like Japanese title of *Wander And The Colossus*. The Western name for the game, however, was still being mulled over.

In December that same year, *Edge* magazine previewed the game under the heading *Ico 2* and described that label as "a moniker SCEE [Sony Computer Entertainment Europe] is keen to maintain for the Western release, rather than the literal translation". Ultimately, Sony Computer Entertainment America won the debate in the West with its proposal of *Shadow Of The Colossus* and by May 2005 the game was being exhibited by that title at the E3 show to an eager reception. *Edge* reported that the game "drew heavy crowds, all clamouring to get their hands on and heads around its sheer enormity", adding that there were "onlookers gasping at every arc and mist of blood that spurted from sword wounds". This enthusiasm was maintained on the game's release in October 2005 when it earned rave reviews, awards and recognition (such as being named IGN's Game Of The Year) along with sales figures that delighted Sony. A news report from Gamesindustry.biz at the time relayed that the game sold 140,000 units in its first week in Japan, putting it on track to very quickly surpass the 209,000 all-time total copies of *Ico* that had been sold in the country.

> "IT STOOD OUT FOR HAVING A UNIQUE GAME MECHANIC AND UNUSUALLY STRONG EMOTIONAL AND NARRATIVE BEATS"
> **RORY LITTLE**

By this point, the start of the PlayStation 3 era was not far away. Yet it would be several years before owners of the latest console would have a chance to experience an enhanced version of *Shadow Of The Colossus*. Instead of Team Ico taking the reins, development of the *Ico & Shadow Of The Colossus HD Collection* was handled by Bluepoint Games, a studio based in Texas renowned for its expertise

BIRD

■ The first flying colossus perches besides a misty lake. Reaching it involves diving through an underwater arch.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

Shoot arrows at the bird to get its attention. When it swoops, dive onto a wing. Cling on hard and attack the wings and tail.

MINOTAUR B

■ This bearded giant is tricky to find. It lurks deep underground, beneath an ancient temple, beyond a dark forest.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

Hide in the alcove found at the end of the hall. When the giant stoops to look for you, hold onto its beard and start ascending.

EEL

■ A long underwater creature with a catfish face and an electric eel body, this boss is a shocking, slippery character.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

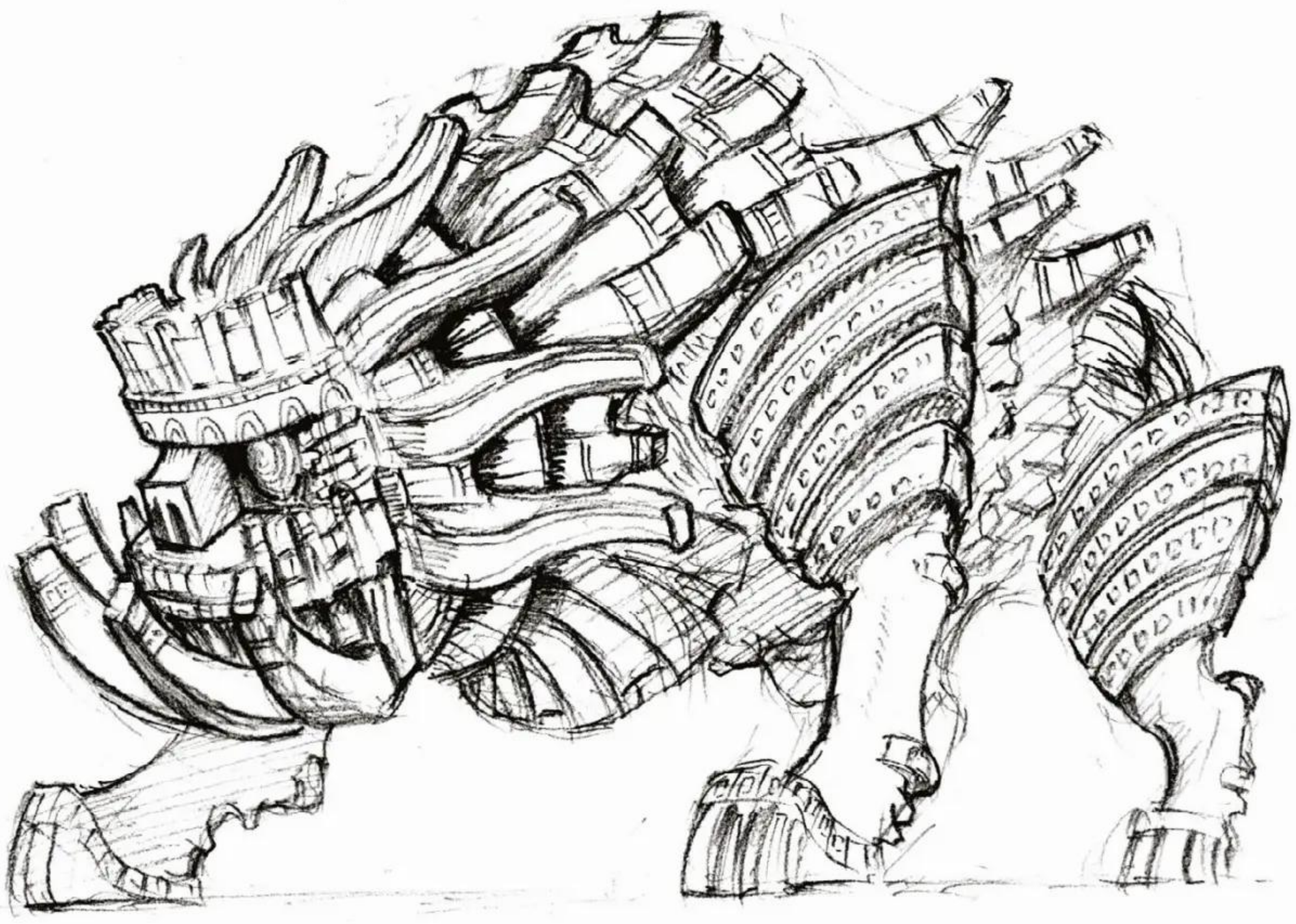
Mount the tail fur and cling on while being dragged underwater. Once it surfaces, make your way up the body and disable the electric spikes.

YAMORI B

■ In the game code, this wall-climber is labelled Yamori B. The Yamori A variant was an abandoned, earlier iteration.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

Shoot its legs while it climbs the amphitheatre, knocking it onto its back, then quickly get to the lower level to target its underside.



▶ in remasters and remakes. How did Ueda feel about passing on control of the work? "The [PS3] remastered version was essentially an upgraded version of the original PS2 release, so I didn't feel any particular sense of incongruity," he reasons. A much more significant reworking came in the Playstation 4 era, when Bluepoint fully remade *Shadow Of The Colossus* for the new hardware. "As for the remake, genDESIGN was initially involved in directing it, but with development on *The Last Guardian* becoming busier, I wasn't able to oversee it through to the end," Ueda explains. "Because of that, I'm not very familiar with the finer details of the changes that were made. Still, I feel very grateful that it provides today's players with an environment where they can experience the game."

That gratitude was also felt by players and critics, as the PS4 incarnation received high acclaim for the improvements it delivered in terms of graphics, performance and the control scheme. Joe Houston, a senior software engineer who worked on the remake at Bluepoint, says he was initially surprised when the job came in. "Any time a new contract was coming in at Bluepoint, it could be anything. Bluepoint had already remastered *Shadow Of The Colossus* for the PS3, so I wasn't expecting it at all," he confesses. "At first it was like, 'Huh, we're redoing the game again. What are we going to bring to it that we didn't before?'" Any reservations Joe had were quickly quelled, firstly when he realised that time around a full remake was on the cards, and secondly when he experienced the reaction from fans on its grand reveal at the E3 show in 2017. "We knew our announcement was going to be there and I was very curious as to what the reception would be," Joe recalls. "There was a fade to black from the last trailer and then the tower from *Shadow Of The Colossus* showed. Immediately, everyone went 'wooaahh!' – which was such a bigger reaction than I had ever imagined. It was hype, all the way through. That was the moment when I was like, 'Oh my god, the fans are excited, and it's going to mean something to them.'"

> "SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS REMAINS POWERFUL IN THE SAME WAY A CLASSIC FILM REMAINS POWERFUL"
> **JOE HOUSTON**

Among the people given special thanks in the credits of the remake is Nomad Colossus, whose name is well known in the *Shadow Of The Colossus* fan community. Nomad, whose real name is Michael Lambert, has amassed more than 75,000 YouTube subscribers for his work documenting hidden aspects of original game code. Watching his videos and reading his blogs offers a fascinating insight into parts of the game world that Team Ico created but ultimately made off-limits to players. There is even an achievement trophy dedicated to Nomad in the remake (The Boon Of Nomad), which can be earned by finding a secret cave. Michael tells us he initially became intrigued after finding an existing online community dedicated to uncovering secrets about the game. "There was something special about this group of people who all had the same hope of finding an unknown secret in the game years after it was released. They called themselves 'secret seekers' and put forward all manner of crazy theories in the hopes of uncovering something never before seen," Michael says, before keenly giving credit to those who came before him, including a pioneering player known as Pikol. "There is a fully rendered dam that was found by Pikol that is far outside the bounds of the normal game arena. This was, and still is, the pinnacle discovery in *Shadow Of The Colossus*." ▶

BOSS RUSH

KAME

■ This electric-projectile spewing, mean-faced beast with spidery legs is fast to boot, making it a challenging adversary.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

Lure it to a geyser on horseback, then shoot its legs when it tries to balance. Flipped on its shell, you can clamber on and attack.

NARGA

■ In an underground sand dune, this serpentine foe pursues you at speed beneath the surface before rising up to pounce.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

On horseback, let the beast chase you, then shoots its eye when it rises. When it crashes into a cave wall, leap on its back.

LEO

■ The smallest colossus so far makes up for its size by being swift and savage. It charges like a bull, so watch out for its attacks.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

It fears fire, so use a torch to force it back over a ledge. Its armour will break in the fall, leaving it wide open for you to attack.

POSEIDON

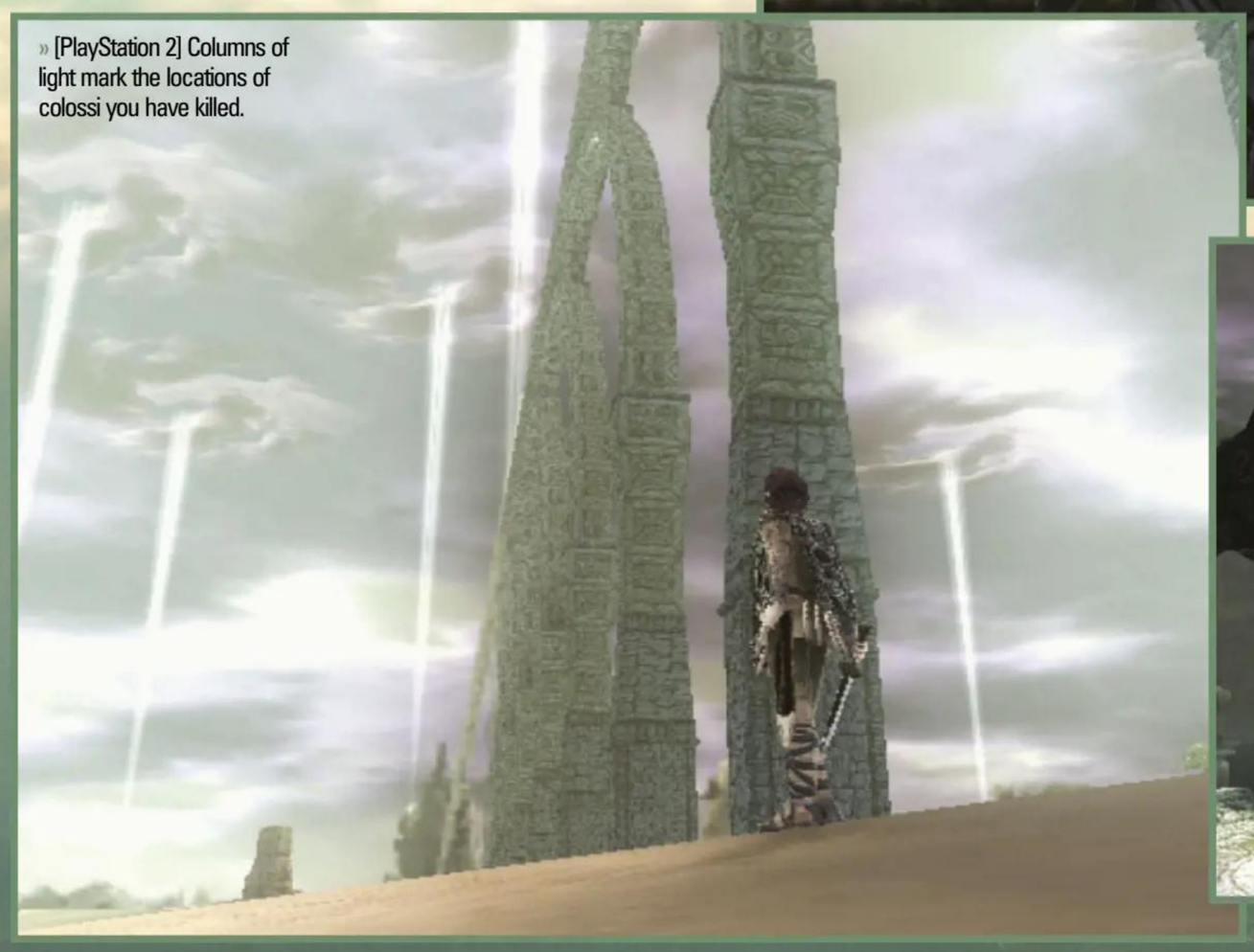
■ Another lake-lurker, this gargantuan crab-like colossus rises up out of the water with a fearsome armoured head.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

Climb its back, then whack the teeth-like protrusions on its crown to steer it towards a tower. Jump off, hide and leap for its exposed underside.

» [PlayStation 2] Beards, back hair and gigantic limbs are all viable routes to scale your foes.

» [PlayStation 2] Your quest centres around resurrecting Mono, who regains complexion each time you kill a colossus.



» [PlayStation 2] Columns of light mark the locations of colossi you have killed.

» [PlayStation 2] Puzzle-solving skills are needed to start tackling each enemy.

SNAKE

■ The only colossus that will not attack you glides high in the sky above a desert, with its pale underside visible.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

Shoot arrows into its underside until it descends, then leap from your horse onto a wing. As it flies, find the weak spots across its body.

CERBERUS

■ Amidst overgrown temple ruins, a small, fast and furious colossus resembling a snarling dog lies in wait.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

Platforming skills will help here. Leap to higher ground and bait the beast into knocking over columns, until it collapses a roof onto itself.

MINOTAUR C

■ As you cross a seemingly empty plaza, the ground shakes and an ape-like giant clambers up from a valley.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

Find loose slabs and provoke the beast to whack them. Then climb up the angled slabs to reach a bridge, and leap onto its body.

EVIS

■ The final battle pits you against an enormous enemy raised high on a podium from which it hurls electric bolts at you.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

Dash for cover and use underground passages to get closer. Once you are climbing, make death-defying leaps across body parts to find weak spots.

REMAKING A CLASSIC

JOE HOUSTON ON THE HIGHLY ACCLAIMED PS4 REMAKE

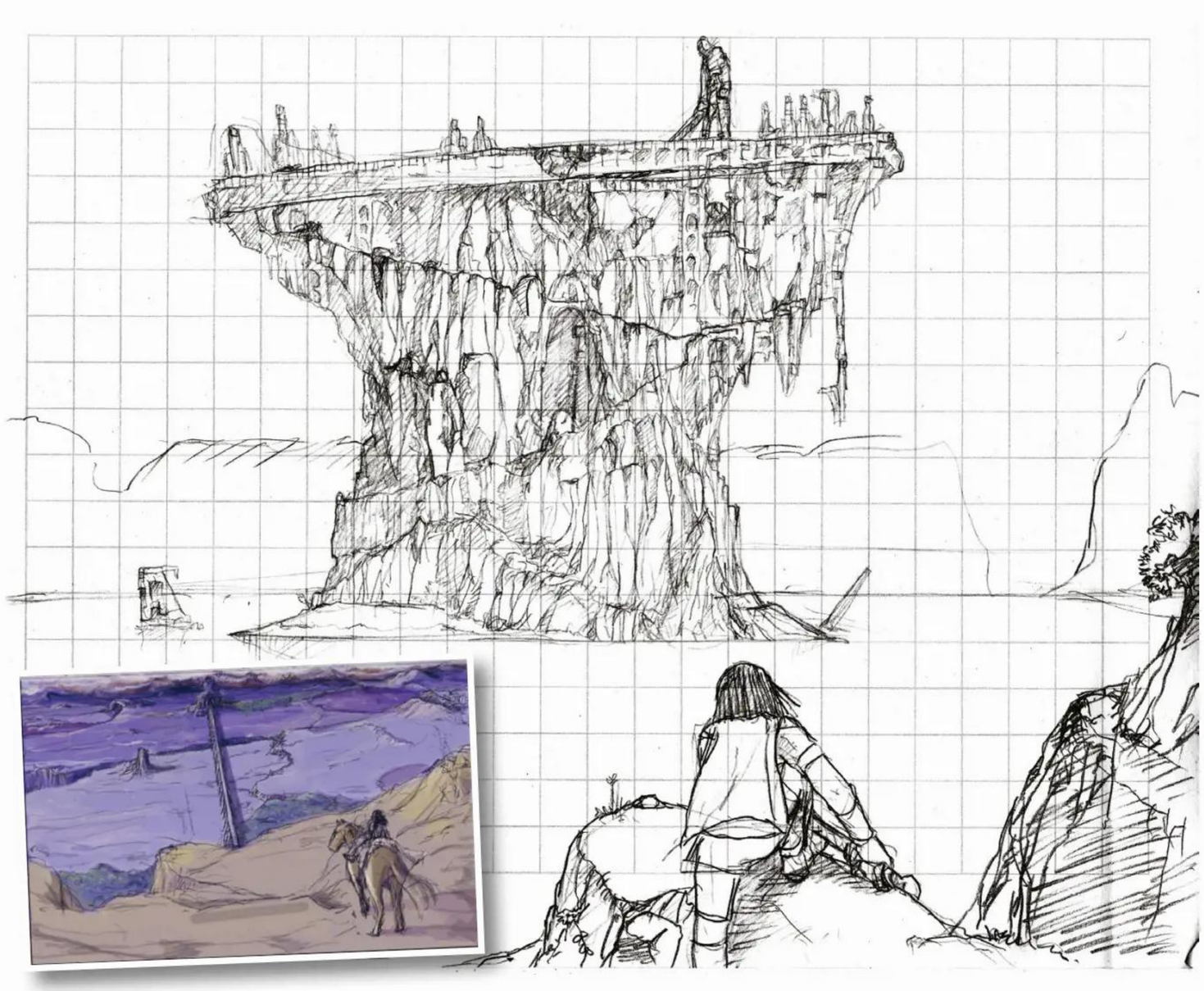
HOW DID YOU FEEL ABOUT WORKING ON THE REMAKE OF SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS?
I was excited. There was some pressure, and that part of the conversation that honestly can't be answered until you're done, which is, "How much is this going to mean to the fans?" I will say that the answer to that question is: I've been working on games for over 20 games, including a bunch of games that are important to people, and *Shadow* is the one I hear about the most, by far.

WHAT WAS THE PROCESS FOR WORKING WITH THE ORIGINAL CODE?
We had a mantra at Bluepoint that we wanted to make the game you remember, which is different than the game 'as it is'. The game 'as it is' creates a feeling and a memory. Like if you go back and play the PS2 *Shadow Of The Colossus* today, are you going to remember that it had a terrible draw distance, that the framerate was poor, and that it had a different control scheme to anything you'd play today? Probably not. For *Shadow* as well as other remakes, we'd first get the original game working on modern hardware – a straight port. Then we'd have the Bluepoint engine and the legacy code running in parallel, and there was this interweaving between the two. The old code was always the bedrock, the foundation the remake was built on. It was equal parts archeology and modern game making.

WERE THERE MANY BUGS TO FIX?
Fixing legacy bugs is a big conversation when working on a game like this, because you're taking a swing at the original intent and the way that game was, and sometimes those quirks are held really dearly by gamers. With *Shadow*, it's definitely not up there in terms of logical bugs. The main things that persisted were framerate, [the] unusual control scheme, and visuals such as the fog and draw distance. We felt the fog wasn't by intent, but more a technical limitation. Quite a bit of what I did was modernising the control scheme. That was one that was high risk and high reward.

WHAT WAS IT LIKE SEEING THE RECEPTION?
Hardcore fans of *Shadow* love the remake, and that's great, but new players love it too, which is testament to the original's voice and what is still different about the game in today's landscape. Over the years I've heard, "*Shadow* is my favourite game," that's not us, that's the original game – then they say, "You did a great job on the remake," which is as good as you can hope for.

WHY DO YOU THINK THE GAME HAS SUCH AN ENDURING LEGACY?
Shadow found people at a time when a lot of them didn't realise games could be art, and could give you a complex emotional reaction. It was a growing up phase for a lot of people my age when they realised games could be a hobby, they could be a way of life, they could even be something more. Then on top of that, it's an auteur game, it has a singular vision, it makes its decisions regardless of how you feel about them. It remains special.



» [PlayStation 2] Your steadfast steed, Agro, is your closest companion in the Forbidden Lands.

On his own findings, Michael notes, "I discovered the lands outside the main peninsula that we call the beta mountains. Before this it was assumed that the mountains and dam were just leftover models that were put to one side and forgotten about, but it's clear they were in their correct areas all along. That is, when you overlay the beta mountains and dam on the world map, you can see how they fit in with the rest of the Forbidden Lands. So there was a much larger vision for the game early on, but due to time constraints and the budget they had to reduce it to its current form." He also recounts using a memory editor to explore a prominent scene towards the end of the game, where a bridge suddenly crumbles beneath Agro and Wander. "I wanted to find Agro after this happened. I 'warped' Wander down below the game's surface only to find the floating pieces of the bridge suspended in the void. Amazingly, these bridge parts were still solid so Wander could stand on them." It has now been 16 years since Michael started data-mining and exploring the game in this way. "You would think after 16 years there would be a point where there was nothing left to do, but that's never been the case. I am always working on a new blog post or video or checking out some new way to change what we can do in the game."

> "IT WAS A PROJECT WITH MANY CHALLENGES, BUT RECEIVING SUCH HIGH PRAISE NOW MAKES ME FEEL THAT ALL THE EFFORT WAS WORTHWHILE"
> **FUMITO UEDA**

The dedication of community members like Michael shows the deep impact *Shadow Of The Colossus* has had on players, just as it has on game developers. Each of the people we interviewed for this article has their own personal story about the game, from Michael being contacted by his YouTube subscribers who grew into adulthood watching his videos, to Joe playing through the remake with his young daughter (who enjoyed riding the horse, but not so much the monster-slaying parts). "*Shadow Of The Colossus* remains powerful in the same way a classic film remains powerful," Joe reasons. "That has to do with the narrative choices and voice of the game. But it's not just a game you watch – it is a game you play, that you interact with, through and through." For Michael, the game, "has a dream-like quality about it. It's art brought to life, digital poetry, another dimension where you can go and lose yourself". So how does Ueda himself feel looking back on the colossal impact of his creation? "In the ever-changing game industry, I'm truly grateful that even after 20 years, the game still remains in the memories of so many people," he reflects. "It was a project with many challenges during its development, but receiving such high praise now makes me feel that all the effort was worthwhile. And I'm sure that feeling is shared not only by myself, but by all the staff who were involved at the time."

We ask Ueda about the eagerly awaited next genDESIGN game *genATLAS*, which was announced at the 2024 Game Awards. In the trailer video, a character with a gun can be seen climbing atop a huge figure as a blast wave approaches on the horizon. Can players expect any parallels with *Shadow Of The Colossus*? "I can't go into much detail yet, but in terms of creating a game that I myself would want to play and experience, I think that's something it shares with all my previous works," Ueda replies. "That attitude itself may be the only real common thread." It's a tantalising response that hints at both continuity with, and a departure from, his past works. Given how consistently those works have sparked awe and wonder in players, we can't wait to see what awaits. ✱

» Two flying bosses feature particularly prominently in the film's scenes.

HOLLYWOOD PAYS TRIBUTE

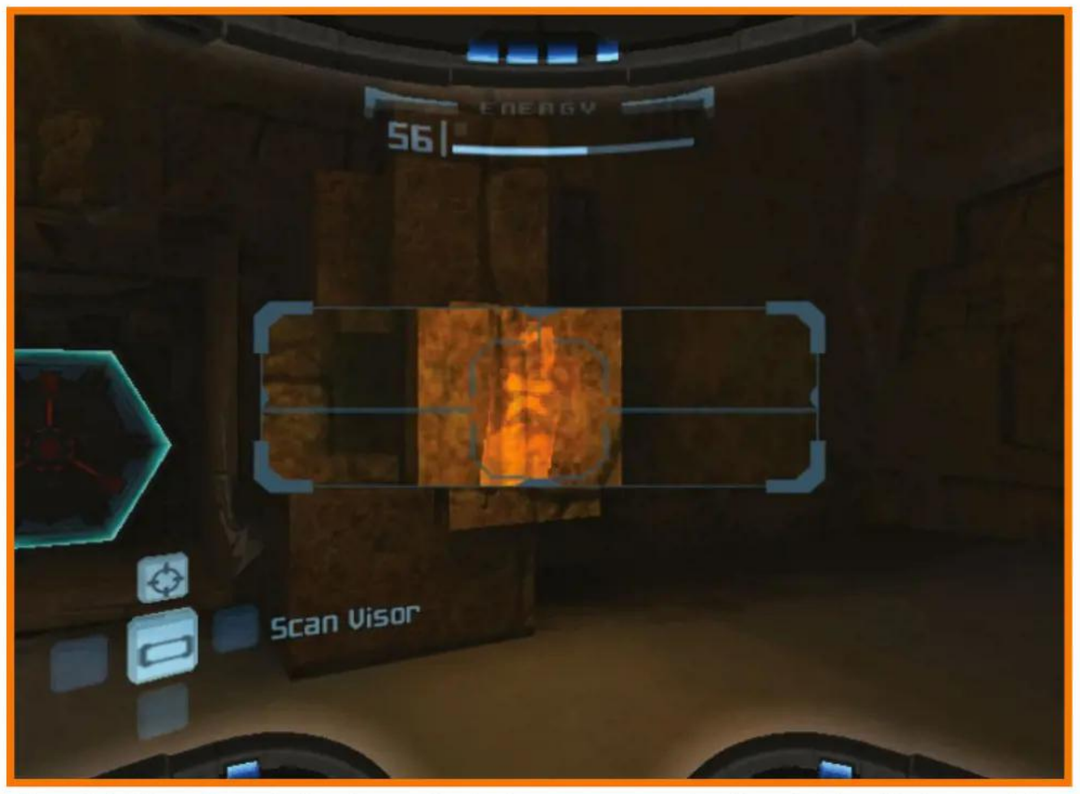
HOW THE FILM REIGN OVER ME INCORPORATES THE GAME

In an early script for *Reign Over Me*, the 2007 drama starring Adam Sandler and Don Cheadle, the plot included a generic arcade shooting game. Sandler's character was a man consumed by the loss of his family in the September 11 attacks, and his means of coping was to wrap himself up in gaming. After reading the script, the film's editor Jeremy Roush suggested the alternative of working *Shadow Of The Colossus* into the plot, even going so far as to sit director Mike Binder down for a demo.

In an interview with Kotaku, Roush pointed out that, "You could see where someone who was dealing with 9/11 would be engrossed by a giant that keeps collapsing over and over again." The fact that Sony published both the game and the film no doubt made it easier for Roush to argue his case. As a result, *Shadow Of The Colossus* plays a heavy part in the film, in which it cleverly represents the enormous emotional burden carried by the main character, Charlie. In his *New Yorker* review, journalist Anthony Lane describes how Charlie "likes to sit in his apartment and play a videogame, *Shadow Of The Colossus*, on a huge screen. Over time, we discover the colossus in whose shadow Charlie lurks".

THE EVOLUTION OF METROID™ PRIME

» [GameCube] Despite its 3D perspective, *Metroid Prime*'s platforming is just as intuitive as the 2D original's.

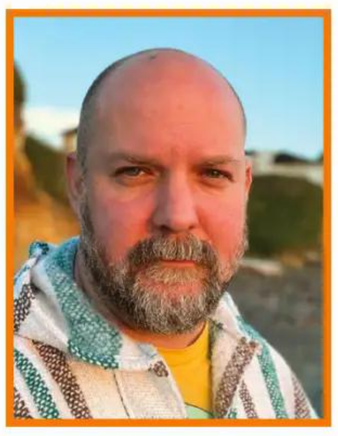


» [GameCube] As well as unlocking doors and activating systems, scanning objects in *Metroid Prime* reveals lore.

A FLAWLESS REIMAGINING OF NINTENDO'S 2D SERIES IN 3D, METROID PRIME WAS MET WITH UNANIMOUS ACCLAIM AND RECEIVED TWO POPULAR SEQUELS. PRIME TRILOGY CREATIVES JASON BEHR, KYNAN PEARSON AND VINCE JOLY EXPLAIN HOW THE SERIES EVOLVED

WORDS BY RORY MILNE

Jason Behr was lead level designer on the *Prime* series while at Retro. These days he's a cool housedad.



Echoes and *Corruption* level designer Kynan Pearson is now a creative director for the videogames industry.

After 16-bit gaming faded, there were many failed attempts to adapt popular sprite-based games into polygon-powered follow-ups. Some 2D concepts simply didn't work in 3D, while others were unsuccessfully translated by developers struggling to adapt to thinking in three dimensions. The developers of *Metroid Prime* avoided these and other pitfalls while transitioning their inspiration into 3D. This was all the more impressive given *Metroid*'s eclectic gameplay. Not only was the NES classic a non-linear adventure, but it also encompassed platforming and shoot-'em-up elements.

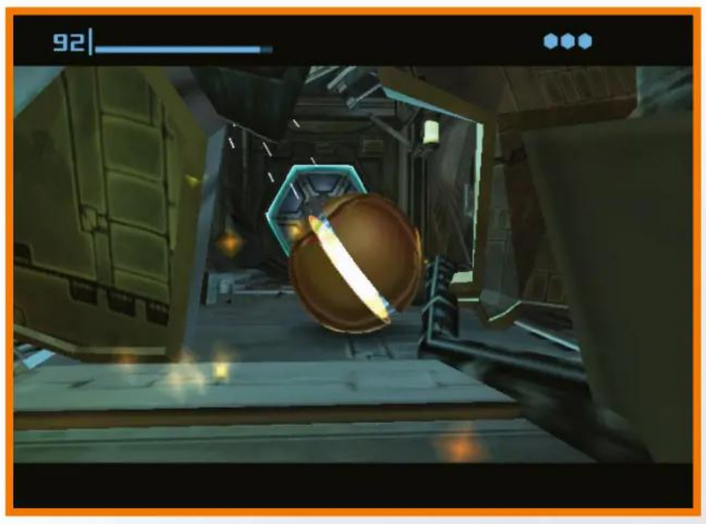
Level designer Jason Behr joined the *Prime* team at Retro Studios having previously worked under its project director Mark Pacini. Jason then took his lead from preliminary designs that had been produced by *Prime*'s senior designers. "I'd previously worked for Mark as a junior level designer at Acclaim Studios Austin. Afterwards, I heard about an open position on his new mystery project at Retro," Jason recalls. "By the time I joined, a rough high-level Metroidvania world and ability pick-up flow influenced by classic *Metroid* experiences had already been drafted. There had also been some paper planning and artwork for level ideas, which I modified and translated into three-dimensional, more vertically layered spaces for platforming. I also made sure that opportunities for classic side-scrolling Morph Ball sequences weren't overlooked."

But far from being simply an exercise in adapting 2D *Metroid* mechanics for a three-dimensional space, *Prime* was also intended to stand in its own right as an innovative and exciting exemplar of 3D gaming. Nevertheless, the cutting-edge design imagined for *Prime* continually drew inspiration from the mechanics established by its predecessors. "We had to figure out how to uniquely take advantage of the use of 3D and first-person in ways that hadn't been seen before, which was arguably the higher priority by way of it being the higher risk. *Prime* needed to establish its own identity," Jason notes. "But in the background, there were always team members faithfully exploring which parts of the *Metroid* franchise DNA could be preserved in spirit, and if so what adjustments would be necessary. We were all fans, after all."

One aspect of *Metroid*'s DNA that required considerable thought was the side-on adventure's platforming. More specifically, *Prime*'s designers needed to know how best to represent the boundless energy of its heroine Samus Aran when jumping from surface to surface in a way that felt natural and would be intuitively understood from a first-person perspective. "One of the most interesting development puzzles was reconciling Samus jumping with the mechanical limitations of first-person," Jason observes. "Since players couldn't see directly behind, above or below, or turn quickly without disorientation, we needed to think more about forward momentum. So while systems ▶

SoftHare executive creative director Vince Joly was an animator on *Echoes* and *Corruption*'s lead animator.

> "ONE OF THE MOST INTERESTING DEVELOPMENT PUZZLES WAS RECONCILING SAMUS JUMPING WITH THE MECHANICAL LIMITATIONS OF FIRST-PERSON"
> JASON BEHR



» [GameCube] *Metroid Prime* switches from a first-person viewpoint to a third-person one for Morph Ball sequences.

designers and engineers worked hard at perfecting the *feel* of Samus' powerful jumps, in level design we experimented with platform sizes, heights and distances relative to player ability, angles to sequential targets and visual contrast cues that put the mind more at ease."

A defining challenge of the 2D *Metroid* titles was rightly deemed unworkable when depicted through Samus' eyes, but that didn't mean that *Prime* couldn't pay homage to this recurring setpiece in a way that made sense in first-person. All that was needed was a power-up that made Samus' standard double-jump feel tame. "As you gained the Space Boots mid-game there were some really empowering sequences that had a sense of freedom and rhythm," Jason enthuses. "And while we couldn't directly translate the iconic platforming shafts of the 2D series we did achieve some pretty impressive vertical spaces by way of gently curving, rising jump sequences, like in the far corners of Phendrana Drifts."

The guiding principle underpinning both jumping and aiming weapons in *Prime* was ease of use, and so features like locking onto targets while retaining freedom of movement were incorporated. Aside from not wanting to make platforming a needlessly difficult afterthought – as first-person shooters often did, this approach would also better represent *Prime*'s highly skilled protagonist. "We had to take all that and hold it up to Nintendo's philosophy of accessibility; that games should not necessarily be easier to beat or complete, but easier to understand, inviting to try and satisfying to accomplish," Jason reasons. "When you combined that with stepping into Samus' persona as a character it didn't make sense that an athletic, seasoned bounty hunter would struggle to aim a weapon or jump. We needed players to immediately feel her confidence, not feel hesitation and clumsiness. We could find the challenge elsewhere."

Elements of this challenge came in the form of puzzles and strategic battles. These often required a special visor capable of scanning objects and enemies to reveal information, backstory and weaknesses. This visor also allowed players to activate machinery and systems. Two other visors could reveal otherwise invisible foes using X-rays and thermal imaging. "*Metroid Prime*'s visor system layered on fresh ways to search for information, provided variety in both puzzles and combat, and give new value to old areas being re-traversed at later stages," Jason assesses. "As a player, the ability to scan made me hungry to learn anything and everything I could about

> "BEING AN ADVENTURE GAVE US PERMISSION TO CRAFT MOMENTS OF AWE, WHERE DISCOVERY WAS A REWARD UNTO ITSELF"
> JASON BEHR

» [GameCube] First seen in *Super Metroid*, the Grapple Beam allows you to swing to otherwise inaccessible places.

» [GameCube] Corridors lined with laser-firing eyes called Eyons are typical of *Metroid Prime*'s physical challenges.

each environment, and to proactively unravel the story. It was also a great opt-in helper, rather than having an invasive pop-up when struggling with a puzzle or encounter."

This focus on problem solving and discovery was complemented by level designs created to encourage exploration; *Prime* had grander ambitions than to just be a mere first-person shooter. Like the *Metroid* games before it, *Prime* couldn't be easily categorised, and so based on its hybrid nature it was decided to call it a first-person adventure. "Part of what made any *Metroid* game special was understanding that players could be rewarded primarily for traversal, curiosity and perception, not just for combat," Jason points out. "I also think a first-person adventure begged the player to stop and enjoy the view. Levels were composed carefully to lead the player's eye while entering the space to provide choices and goals. Lastly, being an adventure gave us permission to craft moments of awe, where discovery was a reward unto itself in between the intensity of battles."

While trailblazing a new direction for the series led to some difficulties during development, including lengthy crunch time, the decision to make *Prime* a first-person adventure was validated on its release. It sold in its millions and received near-perfect reviews. Ultimately it became a best-selling GameCube title. This success led to the sequel *Metroid Prime 2: Echoes*, which gained its primary concept after some discussion, as *Echoes'* level designer Kynan Pearson

» [GameCube] The bosses in *Metroid Prime* can be tough to take down, even after scanning them for weaknesses.

STAGES OF EVOLUTION: PRIME INSPIRATIONS (1986-2002)

METROID

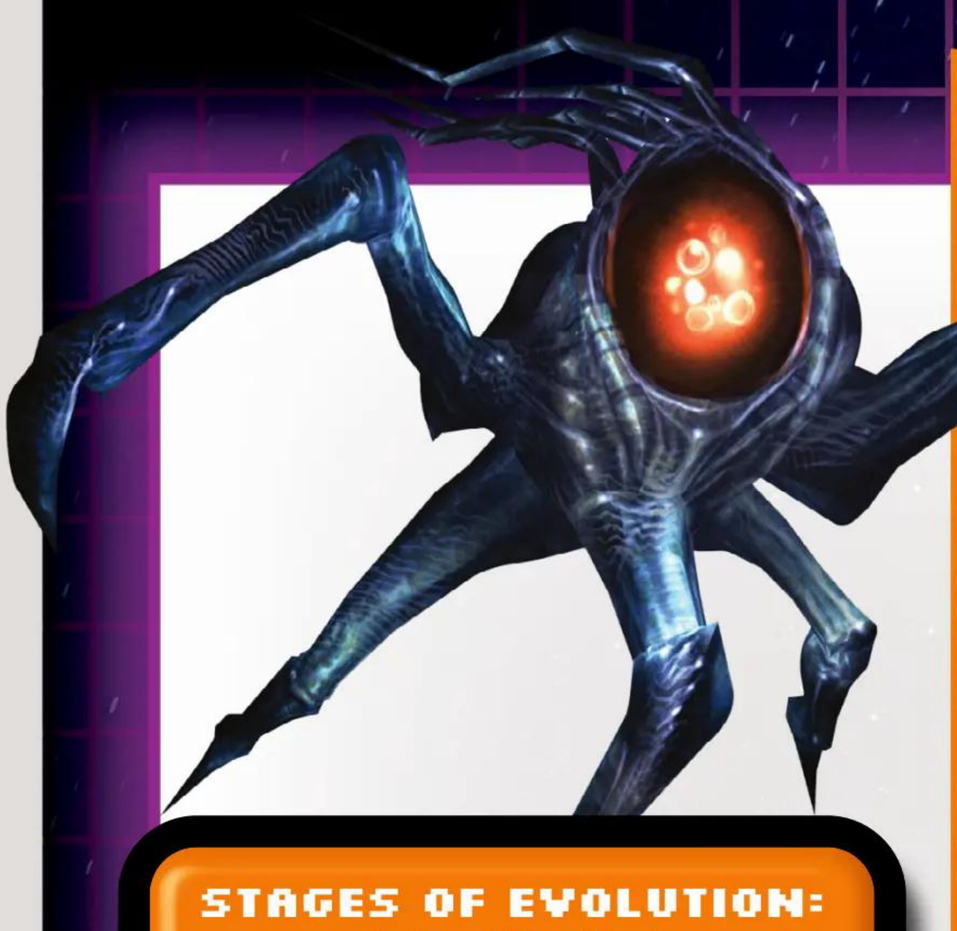
The original works so well that it's little wonder the *Prime* titles retained so much of its gameplay. *Metroid* is a platformer/shoot-'em-up arcade adventure, with its main draw being exploration of non-linear levels to find power-ups that facilitate your progress.

SUPER METROID

In addition to giving the *Prime* series a more fully realised version of Samus' world to adapt than *Metroid* had, the 16-bit sequel also introduced features such as the Charge Beam, mini-map and Grappling Beam, all of which were incorporated into the *Prime* trilogy.

METROID FUSION

Technically a predecessor to *Metroid Prime* due to releasing earlier in most regions, *Fusion* unlocks features in *Prime* when a Game Boy Advance and GameCube running the games are linked. For example, after you've completed *Prime* you get access to Samus' Fusion suit.



» [GameCube] In *Echoes*, your foes are often possessed by a race from an alternate dimension called Dark Aether.

» [GameCube] Jumping into bomb slots in *Echoes* while in Morph Ball form allows you to activate machinery.

» [GameCube] Players are subtlety guided through *Echoes* by environmental features like this abandoned terminal.

STAGES OF EVOLUTION: PRIME SPIN-OFFS (2004-2006)

METROID PRIME: HUNTERS - FIRST HUNT

This DS pack-in title is a demo version of *Prime: Hunters*, which came out over a year later. Rather than featuring content from *Hunters*, *First Hunt* gives you single-player training missions and multiplayer deathmatches in three arenas that are unique to the demo.

METROID PRIME PINBALL

Although it doesn't reflect its inspiration's core gameplay, *Metroid Prime Pinball* takes Samus' Morph Ball form and has a lot of fun with it. Tables themed around *Prime* levels help the spin-off's authenticity, as do the likes of wall-jumping and roaming *Metroid* enemies.

METROID PRIME: HUNTERS

More of an FPS than the core *Prime* games, *Hunters* nevertheless delivers a *Prime*-like experience on the DS. Its puzzles are simpler and its levels more linear than *Prime*, *Echoes* or *Corruption*, but it does introduce the concept of remotely controlling Samus' ship.

▶ explains. "We had two separate premises, and we ended up on a dark world/light world one," Kynan reviews. "Tanabe-san from Nintendo had worked on *A Link To The Past*, so he had experience of working with those themes. But it was difficult in terms of world-planning to make everything make sense when we were dealing with two separate worlds. *Echoes*' structure having a central hub with three additional environments attached to it was a by-product of the complexity of going between portals linking dark and light worlds."

From a perspective of *Echoes*' narrative, its dark world was explained as an evil alternate version of a planet called Aether. Being as the two planes were essentially mirror images of each other they needed to look somewhat similar, but at the same time the malevolent iteration was required to provoke a sense of disquiet. "We needed the dark world to be familiar enough in juxtaposition to the light world, but then we also needed it to have a distinct look," Kynan qualifies. "We would create these effects that moved like earthworms that would scroll along surfaces and move in an uneasy way. We also changed the colour palette to lean more towards a higher saturation but also darker hues. Then there were light bubbles that added a unique quality to the look of the dark world."

On a higher level, the hub and three environments that underpinned *Echoes*' structure gave opportunities to differentiate different areas of the game from one another. This was applied to aesthetics, themes and mechanics, and as well as making stages of *Echoes* distinct, it provided contrast between it and its lighter, brighter predecessor. "We wanted variety, and going from an arid region to a waterlogged one was a significant theme change; it also afforded different gameplay opportunities," Kynan considers. "These settings felt alien and desolate because the environment themes were darker than those in *Prime*. That played up *Echoes*' light and dark worlds. We were desaturating the palette, so the variety between the Luminoth Temple, the sand lands and the bogs wasn't that visually significant, but it created a great contrast between them and the digital Sanctuary Fortress."

» [GameCube] Just being in Dark Aether drains your health, but you can replenish it by entering safe zones.

» [GameCube] In keeping with *Prime*, the bosses in *Echoes* often leave behind power-ups after they're beaten.

» [GameCube] Unlike *Prime*, *Echoes* has multiplayer modes: Deathmatch and the coin collection-based Bounty.

Another way that *Echoes* distinguished itself from *Prime* was by bringing back aspects of earlier *Metroid* titles such as Samus' deadly somersault move the Screw Attack and wall-jumping. *Echoes* also boasted a four-player local multiplayer mode, which *Prime* had lacked, although this split-screen offering had been intended to be full-screen and online. "Before we knew for sure that we were doing *Echoes* we worked on a multiplayer mode that was supposed to be online," Kynan confirms. "But as we discovered that there wouldn't be the ease of online that we wanted we started focussing on a four-player split-screen instead. At that point the multiplayer became a little more light-hearted, and we had to tone down the poly counts for the environments because they needed to be rendered in all four quarters of the screen."

> "SOMETIMES 'LESS IS MORE', AND THE LACK OF DIALOGUE STRENGTHENED THE SENSE OF ISOLATION AND MYSTERY"
> VINCE JOLY

In addition to *Echoes*' modes, the sequel was further enhanced by animated sequences that played out throughout the game with the intent of driving its narrative forward, setting the scene for important setpieces and enhancing its tone. They even gave visual clues for certain forthcoming challenges, as *Echoes'* animator Vince Joly recollects. "I was brought on as a contract animator near the completion of *Echoes* to help create the in-game cinematics," Vince reflects. "These complemented the exploration experience and often provided subtle clues to the player about how to approach puzzles or bosses. Sometimes 'less is more', and the lack of dialogue strengthened the sense of isolation and mystery, which allowed the player to project their own thoughts onto their avatar Samus."

The response to *Echoes* was equal to that experienced by *Prime*, with both players and critics lauding its storytelling and light world/dark world dynamics, although the

multiplayer wasn't quite as well received. Its follow-up *Metroid Prime 3: Corruption* had a point of difference without considering its design, simply because it was created to take advantage of the motion control-oriented Wii, as *Corruption* level designer Kynan Pearson remembers. "Mark Haigh-Hutchinson did a great job with the control scheme using the early prototypes that we had, and one of the key things was that being able to look wherever you wanted changed the camera control," Kynan remarks. "You could move at a natural pace and look around at the same time. We could also have tighter environments with sharper corners, and a lot more verticality where you could look at your pathing as you were discovering things that were out of the normal camera view."

» [Wii] Like its predecessors, *Corruption* throws environmental hazards at you, including a collapsing bridge.

» [Wii] *Corruption*'s screen-high bosses take advantage of the verticality made possible by the Wii's controllers.

***Corruption* also stood out thanks to its new mechanics, and one of the most interesting of these was a power-up called Hypermode.** With potentially life-ending risk/reward dynamics, it dared players to spend Samus' health on becoming near invulnerable with powered-up weapons. Kynan describes Hypermode as being invaluable in the right hands. "We wanted a layer of flow, where players who were able to understand the system could take advantage of it," Kynan ponders. "It was interesting, because we were basically playing with the resource of health as a means of difficulty adjustment. So basically you were spending your health in order to make getting through a scenario easier. It was almost like you were gambling with the chances of finishing a level without taking more damage than the health you were going to otherwise spend on Hypermode."

Further distinction from its predecessors was achieved by *Corruption* giving Samus three different planets to travel between. Each world's look was imagined by different teams of artists, albeit with teams regularly monitoring each other's progress.

Aside from peer reviews, the visual design of one of the planets required a Herculean cross-discipline effort to realise. "It was more effort to create three planets instead of one, in terms of making sure each planet felt distinct and unique," Kynan acknowledges. "Brio had this central nature thing, but it also had fire sides and ice sides. So that was three themes in one

» [Wii] Visors first appeared in *Prime*, and *Corruption* has one that lets you remotely command Samus' ship.

world. Then Elysium was a completely unique, custom design that we were able to pull off based on a lot of work from design, engineering and art working together on it."

With Samus travelling between worlds, a greater focus was given to her gunship. But rather than just watching cinematics of it traversing space, like in the earlier games, *Corruption* let players interact with and remotely control it. Besides commanding it to land so that Samus could board, players could also instruct it to overcome challenges. "Everybody loved Samus' ship, but it really wasn't utilised all that much in the prior games, so using it to land on different planets was done to hold up its value," Kynan states. "Then having a command visor to call the ship in to lift heavy objects, do bombing runs and various other things felt like a cool evolution that still took advantage of the player seeing things through Samus' perspective the whole time."

The main exception to this first-person perspective was when Samus was in Morph Ball form, during which a third-person viewpoint was adopted. The only time Samus' human form was seen was in cinematics and as she was morphing. *Corruption*'s lead animator Vince Joly remembers getting advice on how Samus should move during these scenes. "We were always told that Samus was stoic, somewhat like Clint Eastwood in an old Western, so we adjusted her motions to slightly reflect that personality," Vince reveals. "Most of the movement set of animations were largely unseen due to the first-person camera; however, I do recall reworking the transitions in and out of the Morph Ball to make them look more natural and smooth, which helped the movement feel satisfying and responsive during gameplay."

> "HAVING A COMMAND VISOR TO CALL THE SHIP IN TO LIFT HEAVY OBJECTS, DO BOMBING RUNS AND VARIOUS OTHER THINGS FELT LIKE A COOL EVOLUTION"
> KYNAN PEARSON

Besides creating cinematics for *Corruption*, Vince's team was tasked with animating every creature, ▶

» [Wii] *Metroid* big bad Ridley attacks Samus in Morph Ball form in one of *Corruption*'s memorable encounters.

STAGES OF EVOLUTION: PRIME SPIN-OFFS (2009-2016)

METROID PRIME: TRILOGY

Far from a mere compilation, *Trilogy* boasts visually superior Wii versions of *Prime* and *Echoes* with motion-control support. The Wii original *Corruption* completes the package. In Japan, standalone Wii versions of *Prime* and *Echoes* were released in place of *Trilogy*.

METROID PRIME: BLAST BALL

Pre-dating the game that it would subsequently appear as part of by a year, *Blast Ball* is a version of soccer played by Galactic Federation marines in mech suits. The *Federation Force* precursor limits its chaos by restricting matches to three mechs against three.

METROID PRIME: FEDERATION FORCE

Something of a spiritual successor to *Hunters*, except *Federation Force* pares back the core gameplay of the *Prime* titles further with its omission of scanning for lore and to activate systems. This makes it even more of an FPS, albeit one where exploration is key.

STAGES OF EVOLUTION:

PRIME SUCCESSORS (2010-2021)

METROID: OTHER M

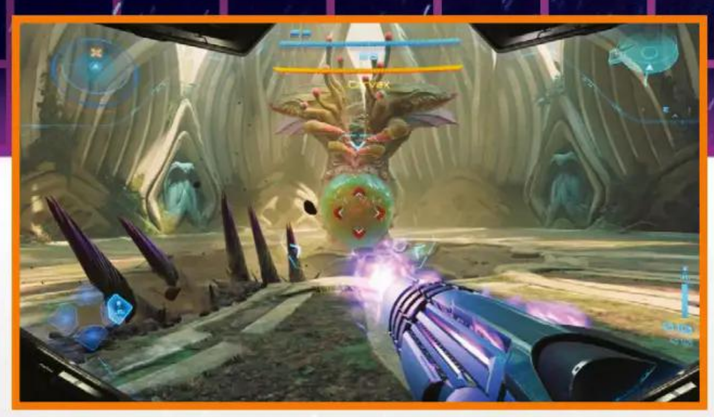
Other M differentiates itself by having both third and first-person perspectives. Platforming, exploration and arm cannon firefights play out in third-person, whereas locking onto targets and firing missiles are first-person, and you can't move in this viewpoint.

METROID: SAMUS RETURNS

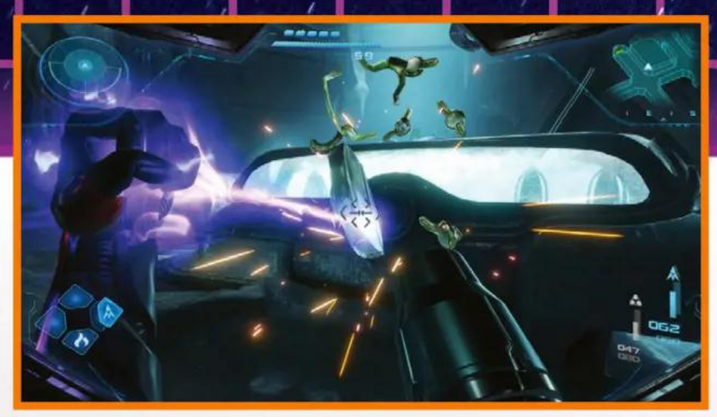
A 3DS remake of the Game Boy title *Metroid II*, *Samus Returns* features new visuals, additional areas to seek out and fresh mechanics. As well as being able to fire in all directions, Samus can gain access to weapons not seen in *Metroid II* such as the Grapple Beam.

METROID DREAD

Created for the Switch by the studio responsible for *Samus Returns*, *Dread* is 2D side-on like its predecessor. It innovates with its introduction of stealth tactics, which include using a Phantom Cloak that makes Samus invisible at the cost of reducing her speed.



» [Switch 2] Just like in the original three *Metroid Prime* games, the bosses in *Beyond* are weird and wonderful.



» [Switch 2] The Grappling Beam is back in *Beyond*, and it allows you to retrieve out-of-reach collectables.

» [Switch 2] One look at a hostile encounter in *Beyond* demonstrates that it has the *Prime* trilogy in its DNA.

opponent and boss that the follow-up threw at Samus. They also produced animations for her outstretched arm cannon, the hand on her other arm when she used it to lock-on to targets and her interactions with her gunship's onboard controls. "Our team was responsible for all in-game as well as cinematic animation for *Corruption*; there were seven animators in total," Vince details. "We were responsible for rigging and animating all the characters in *Corruption*, including Samus. For instance, the twitchy Space Pirate idle animation was one that I did. The biggest challenge was maintaining the high-quality animation we aimed for within a tight production timeline."

The high quality of *Corruption* was noted in critiques that cited it as the best *Prime* title, and its sales reflected this accolade. When reviewing the *Prime* games, *Echoes* and *Corruption* level designer Kynan Pearson feels the trilogy gave players experiences that are no longer offered, although he sees the recently released *Metroid Prime 4: Beyond* changing that. "They were a very unique set of games that were built based on the time period that they existed in, and it's almost like you can't get games like them anymore. So I'm excited that *Metroid Prime* 4 is coming. It's nice to have *Prime* back in people's thoughts again."

The lead level designer on all three *Prime* titles Jason Behr is similarly positive about *Beyond*, and he's certain it will honour the series that it's continuing. "I'm very excited for *Metroid Prime* 4, especially for the

» [Switch 2] A new feature in *Beyond* allows you to activate systems using Samus' psychic abilities.

» [Switch 2] While *Beyond*'s Vi-0-La motorcycle intrigues us, Samus' new sidekick Myles MacKenzie is dividing the series' fanbase.

> "I'M VERY EXCITED FOR METROID PRIME 4, ESPECIALLY FOR THE FRESH GAMEPLAY OPPORTUNITIES, AS RETRO WILL UNDOUBTEDLY HAVE BEEN ASKED TO EVOLVE THE MECHANICS"
> JASON BEHR

fresh gameplay opportunities, as Retro will undoubtedly have been asked to evolve the mechanics of the franchise while staying true to its identity," Jason offers. "Nintendo's got a great track record in rethinking old formulas and reinvigorating old ideas, and Retro did an outstanding job with the remaster, which was a pleasure to play. So I think they'll succeed in moving the *Prime* series forward again."

Asked for his thoughts on *Beyond*, *Echoes'* animator and *Corruption's* lead animator Vince Joly mentions his brief stint on the project and notes his interest in a particularly exciting aspect of the fourth *Prime* title. "I only worked on *Beyond* for a few months at the beginning of production, but I'm curious to see what players think of its new bike mechanic," Vince muses. "Personally, I don't have strong feelings about the game either way yet – it's still too early to tell. But for the sake of my old team at Retro Studios I genuinely hope it's a huge success."

While the reception for *Metroid Prime 4: Beyond* has been strong, it's not found quite the same acclaim as the earlier games. On the technical side, it runs at 120 frames per second on the Switch 2, and as well as twin-stick and motion controls it supports the use of the Joy-Con 2 as a mouse. Fresh gameplay is delivered by Samus' new motorcycle the Vi-0-La, which is used to explore the open-world planet Bryus. The Vi-0-La has boomerang-style homing-missiles that can lock-on to and dispatch multiple targets before returning. It also has a speed boost that when combined with power slides transforms the bike into an engine of destruction. Samus also gains psychic powers that let her operate ancient machines and bend the course of her shots.

At its core, *Beyond* is a faithful evolution of the original *Metroid Prime* titles. Given the last word on these, their lead level designer Jason Behr gives due credit to those who worked with him on the games and to the inspiration they all took from the *Metroid* games that came before *Prime*. "I look back and admire the amazingly talented group of more experienced people whose contributions I was ultimately dependent on," Jason reminisces. "Level design is so often the art of curating spaces that put the rest of the team's best work on display in the strongest arrangement possible. Whether it's reconfiguring another designer or concept artist's seed of an idea or paying homage to the *Metroid* franchise's legacy. So I'm grateful for the leadership and collaboration that made each *Prime* game possible." ✱

METROID PRIME REMASTERED

UPDATING A CLASSIC FOR THE HD ERA

Widely regarded as one of most impressive Nintendo remakes available, *Prime Remastered* employs modern tech to elevate every aspect of the original *Metroid Prime*. To all intents and purposes, *Remastered* looks and plays like a new game and not a recreation of a GameCube title from 2002. The most obvious improvements made by the Switch update come in the form of its stunning HD graphics, enhanced sound and multiple control options, the last of which includes dual-stick controls that allow you to move about and look around at the same time. *Remastered* also offers touch controls, simulates the GameCube original's controls and has hybrid touch/GameCube-like controls, but the dual-stick option is the one that really makes the remake feel up to date. Some subtle concessions to difficulty also help *Remastered* feel more modern, like its optional hint system, which marks your next objective on the map for you if you spend too much time failing to find it for yourself. There's also a Morph Ball jump that saves you from wasting timed bombs. *Remastered* additionally includes several narration modes: off, on for cinematics only and on throughout. The Switch title's many other plus points include amended log book entries that fix plot and canon errors, in-game alerts for when you unlock extras and settings to help players that struggle to distinguish red, green and blue. As you would expect, *Remastered* has absolutely zero load times, and of course, since it's a Switch game you can play it on the go.

CELEBRATING THE XBOX

TWO DECADES AGO, MICROSOFT SOUGHT TO USHER IN A NEW ERA OF GAMES – BIGGER GAMES, SMALLER GAMES, AND GAMES THAT WOULD BE MORE CONNECTED THAN EVER BEFORE. WE JOIN THOSE WHO WORKED WITH THE SYSTEM DURING ITS LIFETIME TO LOOK BACK AT THE MOST BELOVED XBOX CONSOLE

WORDS BY NICK THORPE

MARTYN CHUDLEY
Founder, Bizarre Creations

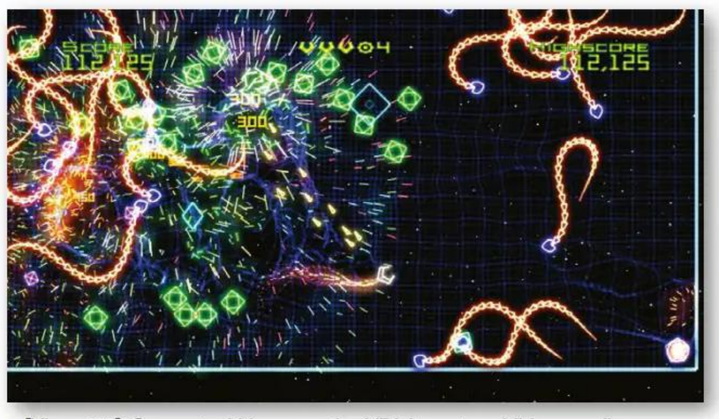
MIKE MIKA
Studio head, Digital Eclipse/Backbone Entertainment

JON GORDON
News editor, *360 Magazine*

When Robbie Bach outlined Microsoft's ambitions for the successor to the Xbox in 2005, they were simple but undeniably bold. "Last generation we were thought leaders. This generation we plan to be market leader." Sure, the original Xbox was a powerful console with plenty of great games, but its lifetime sales only barely scraped past those of the GameCube – Nintendo's least successful traditional console to that point – leaving Microsoft as a distant second-place player in the home-console market. What's more, the mammoth corporation had racked up $4 billion in losses over four years to get that far. Few companies would have been able to absorb such costs, but Microsoft was willing and able to pay for a foothold in a potentially lucrative market. This time around, things would have to be different – successful companies don't stay successful by losing vast sums of money, after all.

Of course, this time around, there was an entire philosophy behind the new console, known as the Xbox 360 rather than the Xbox 2 because "it isn't in the same era" as *Edge* reported J Allard's explanation. At E3 2005, Allard described the new machine as, "A product with games at its core, surrounded by limitless connected digital entertainment." What did that mean, behind the buzzwords? "As well as a standard network connection, the 360 is also compatible with an optional Wi-Fi adapter," *Edge* magazine explained. "As is already becoming standard on Xbox games, this will allow for game updates and add-ons to be downloaded – both free and paid for by the 360's integrated payment system. Demos can also be made available, and the service may promise a new dawn for the concept of episodic games. The Live service will continue much as it is now. Gamertags – and even Live accounts – will be transferable to new machines, and subscriptions via pre-payment cards will be introduced to open the service up to those who don't have credit cards." The magazine concluded, "If Xbox was proof of concept, 360 is intended to make Live omnipresent." The strategy made sense – Microsoft had the best existing online console service, and the company judged that this was the generation in which players would embrace the benefits of networking their machines.

> "THE 360 TURNED OUT TO BE AN IMPRESSIVE MACHINE, FAR BEYOND ANYTHING I HAD PERSONALLY EXPECTED"
> **DAVID BONE GILL**



» [Xbox 360] *Geometry Wars* was the XBLA poster child, a small download offering affordable thrills.

The original Xbox was also known for its power, and the new machine packed a 3.2GHz, triple-core PowerPC CPU named Xenon, 512MB of unified GDDR3 RAM and a 500MHz ATI Xenos GPU – beefy enough

LEE JACKSON
QA technician – Avatars, *Banjo-Kazooie: Nuts And Bolts*, *Kinect Sports Season 2*

DAVID BONE GILL
UI programmer, Bizarre Creations

JAMES SILVA
Founder, Ska Studios

360

» Bill Gates and Steve Ballmer demonstrate the Xbox 360 at CES with *Fight Night Round 3*.

» [Xbox 360] The *Project Gotham Racing* series had always aimed for photorealism, and got the closest it had yet.

that high-definition output would be the new normal, with 720p as a minimum standard. Games would still primarily be delivered on DVD, and unlike the original machine, a hard disk would be optional. "I remember seeing it at E3 2005 like everyone else. As someone who was a huge Jeff Minter fan, seeing his visualiser completely blew my mind," says Mike Mika, who worked on a variety of Xbox 360 games with Digital Eclipse and Backbone Entertainment. "The show floor footage for *Dead Or Alive*, *Project Gotham Racing* and *Gears Of War*, if I recall correctly, really felt like Microsoft was in it to win it."

t had been a long road, getting to that point. "I think we were starting to get a glimpse of an 'Xbox2' or 'Xbox Future' (under the strictest confidence) around August 2003, and we were informed that the CPU and GPU were 'locked down' in September 2003," says Martyn Chudley, whose studio Bizarre Creations was just finishing *Project Gotham Racing 2* at that time. "Although we weren't given too many details, between both us at Bizarre and Microsoft, we started some brainstorming for *PGR3*. We received our first alpha kits in January ▶

» [Xbox 360] Casual games from PopCap were among the early successes on Xbox Live Arcade.

» [Xbox 360] Tecmo had been a prominent Xbox developer, and made waves early with *Dead Or Alive 4*.

» [Xbox 360] *Dead Rising* highlighted a generational leap in the number of animated characters consoles could display.

» [Xbox 360] *Gears Of War* sold millions, and highlighted the graphical grunt of the console.

» [Xbox 360] With games like *Viva Piñata*, Rare was relied upon to hold up the family friendly side of the library.

▶ 2004, and it was around February 2004 when we first started to put together a set of 'final' project goals for *Gotham 3*, based on the new hardware. With the projected launch of the machine to be late-2005, we would have roughly 18 months to build a whole new game engine and toolset around the new hardware, and of course, make a game!"

"The [Power Mac] G5 was only emulating the Xenon, so we didn't really understand what the machine was truly capable of until we got the final hardware," says David Bone Gill, who was working as a UI programmer on *Project Gotham Racing 3* at Bizarre Creations, remembering those early kits. "The 360 turned out to be an impressive machine, far beyond anything I had personally expected." Speaking to *Edge* in 2005, fellow Bizarre Creations coder Roger Perkins compared the new machine to the old one, saying that, "The [Xbox 360] processor and architecture isn't as forgiving about doing things badly as the old Intel chips were. However, do things the way it likes and the thing springs to life and screams along." He

Credit Evan Amos

MODEL STUDENT THE VARIOUS INCARNATIONS OF THE XBOX 360

XBOX 360

■ The original model of Xbox 360 came in two distinct flavours. Pro models came with a component AV cable, a wireless controller and a bundled 20GB hard disk (60GB from 2008). The cheaper Core package had composite AV and a wired controller. In 2007, the Core package was replaced with the Arcade bundle, which included the component AV cable and wireless controller, plus an Xbox Live Arcade compilation disc and a 256MB memory unit – replaced with 256MB internal storage in 2008 and 512MB in 2009. Consoles sold as Pro models are distinguished from their budget counterparts by chrome disc trays.

XBOX 360 ELITE

■ This model was introduced as a premium option in 2007, and was distinguished from the Pro model by its black casing and a comparatively huge 120GB hard disk. The console also came with an HDMI cable for the model's biggest new feature, the HDMI port, which was exclusive to Elite models for a few months before being rolled out to Pro and Arcade systems in the autumn of 2007. In 2009, the bundled HDMI cable was dropped, but the hard disk was upgraded to an even bigger 250GB model, with a second wireless controller and a bundled game added to the package.

XBOX 360 S

■ The first major redesign was introduced in 2010, and is smaller but includes plenty of changes. Wireless networking, a dedicated Kinect port and optical audio output have been added, while swappable faceplates and memory unit slots have been removed, and the hard disk connection has been placed internally. Units were initially black, with those sold with 250GB hard disks distinguished from their 4GB internal memory counterparts by a glossy finish, but glossy models were discontinued in 2011. 320GB special editions were introduced in 2011, and 4GB white models bundled with Kinect arrived in 2012.

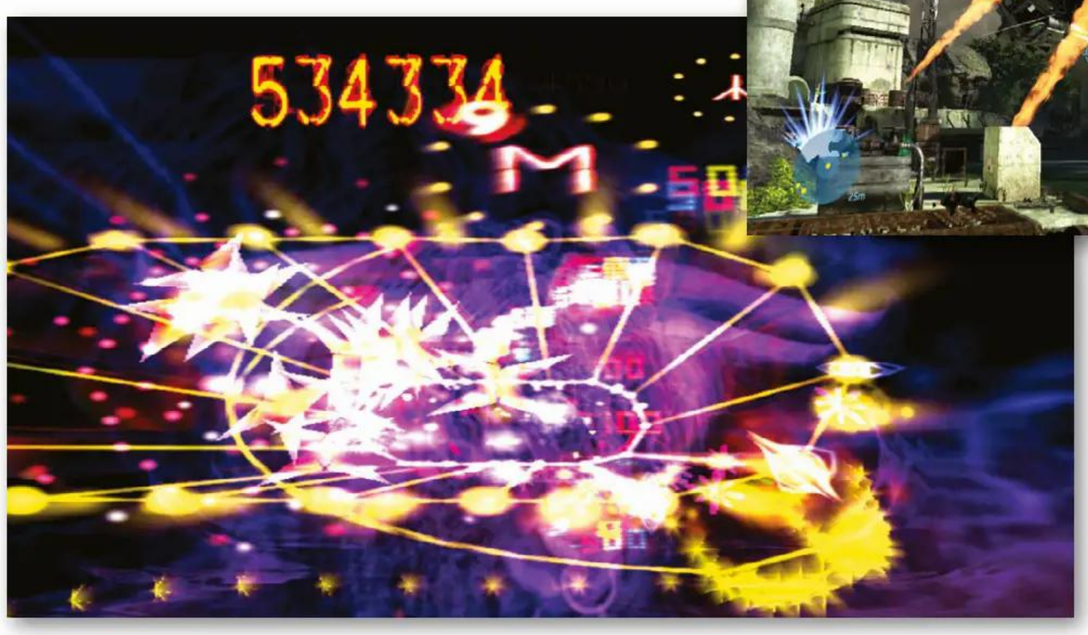
XBOX 360 E

■ The final version of the Xbox 360 was introduced in the summer of 2013, and adopted some of the aesthetic sensibilities of the recently unveiled Xbox One. Though generally similar to the Xbox 360 S, down to the distinction between 4GB and 250GB models, the Xbox 360 E has a few cost-cutting measures. The number of USB ports has been reduced by one, the optical audio output port is gone, and the proprietary Xbox 360 AV connector has been replaced with a 3.5mm jack that only outputs composite AV – thankfully, HDMI is retained. A special blue 500GB model launched in 2014.

» Though Microsoft had little luck with Japanese players, the development community embraced the Xbox 360.

» [Xbox 360] *BioShock* was a hugely impressive game, and arrived on the 360 a year ahead of the PS3.

» [Xbox 360] *Halo 3* was enormously popular, generating record-breaking launch day sales of $170 million in the US.



» [Xbox 360] Without XBLA, it's unlikely that games like Jeff Minter's *Space Giraffe* would have seen release.

also felt that the Xbox 360's superior pixel fill-rate would make it far better at post-processing special effects than the old machine.

"We needed to go with quality and fidelity, and not play the 'numbers' game that so many racing games of the time were doing, each game iteration seemingly having *more* cars, or circuits or whatever," Martyn recalls. "We essentially decided that the game needed to show off the prowess of the hardware, so we wanted a massive increase in detail for both car and environment models, the inclusion of detailed car interiors (not done before), and finally the addition of 3D-animated spectators to help bring the cities to life." The developers also chose to focus on performance cars for this game to add to the feeling of a generational leap. "We actually had a car 'bible' and stipulated that cars had to be capable of 170mph and were recognisable as 'poster' cars," Martyn notes.

In the past, standard-definition displays were the default, and moving to an environment where players could be using anything from 4:3, 480i standard-definition sets to 16:9, 1080i displays caused some headaches. "We take it for granted these days that UI designs need to be flexible, especially with the advent of mobile gaming, but it was all new to us," says Bone. "Our target was 16:9 at 720p, and the assets were built with this resolution in mind. Nearly all the assets were bitmaps, so they didn't scale as well as modern vector-based UIs. Using 720p as the target resolution for *PGR3* was a little ironic, given that the output was upscaled from 600p due to a memory limitation of the 360," he recalls. "Microsoft later outlawed this with a new [Technical Content Requirement], but they also provided a software workaround, which we couldn't implement in time for launch."

Microsoft relied heavily on its third-party publishers for launch games – its own efforts would extend to *Perfect Dark Zero* and *Kameo: Elements Of Power* from Rare, and *Project Gotham Racing 3*. "Our game really showed off the machine – it was a great tech demo – and it was amazing watching it run at full pelt," says Bone. Martyn felt the same way, and after reviewing footage he'd taken of a private demonstration to the press, he decided the studio needed to be proactive. "At the time assets being released were being tightly controlled by the MS marketing department, so naughtily we orchestrated a bit of a 'leak' of this video through a journalist friend of the company, and as hoped for it went down an absolutely storm with the public as it truly looked like nothing else out there," he admits. "I think if we had gone through official channels, this video would never have seen the light of day… I'm still not sure if we ever came clean about this with the Microsoft people!"

> "TO BE ABLE TO DOWNLOAD AND DEMO (AND PURCHASE) GAMES ON DEMAND WAS REVOLUTIONARY IN THE CONSOLE SPACE"
> **MARTYN CHUDLEY**

Packaged games on shelves like that weren't the whole story though, thanks to the downloadable games of Xbox Live Arcade. A service by the same name had launched late in 2004 for the original Xbox, but it required an additional disc and had a fairly limited library, whereas the Xbox 360 incarnation was available as standard to any player with an internet connection. The service initially offered an eclectic mix of arcade classics like *Smash TV* and *Gauntlet*, indie games like *Marble Blast Ultra* and *Mutant Storm Reloaded*, and casual hits like *Bejeweled 2* and *Zuma*. "They really leaned into the arcade spirit with Xbox Live Arcade. At the time, games had to stay under a strict size limit, something like 50MB, so there wasn't much room for anything sprawling or too cinematic. That constraint forced a visceral kind of creativity; you had to think like an old-school arcade developer again," says Mike. "Our Vancouver studio was the one that blazed our trail onto the 360, because they were quite literally porting classic arcade games. It's the same talented group who'd eventually go on to form Code Mystics. It was a scrappy, exciting era where small teams could still make big impressions."

» [Xbox 360] The shift to HD made 30fps targets common, but *Ninja Gaiden II* was ambitious in aiming for 60fps.

» [Xbox 360] Getting *Grand Theft Auto IV* simultaneously with the PS3 was a huge coup for Microsoft.

» [Xbox 360] *Braid* was the critical darling of the first Summer Of Arcade line-up in 2008.

▶ The first big success story on the service was *Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved*, a twin-stick shooter from Bizarre Creations that offered huge value for just 400 Microsoft Points – £3.40 in real money. How big of an impact did Xbox Live Arcade make? "I would say huge – it really was delivering a consolidated online platform that was not available elsewhere in the console market," says Martyn. "Obviously PC gamers had had this sort of experience for years, but to be able to download and demo (and purchase) games on demand was revolutionary in the console space. Also the (then) relatively low prices of these games was a massive factor, and we were lucky enough to have such a high-quality title as *Geometry Wars*, so this was for us the perfect storm."

> "VIVA PIÑATA SHOWED THAT THE 360 WAS MORE THAN CAPABLE OF CREATING WORLDS FULL OF COLOUR AND CHARM"
> **LEE JACKSON**

The Xbox 360 launched on 22 November 2005 in North America, swiftly followed by Europe on 2 December and Japan on 10 December. Microsoft struggled to supply enough consoles to keep up with early demand, but still sold 326,000 of them in November alone. Chart-Track reported that 70,000 consoles were shipped in the first three days on sale in the UK – a record for a home console, but a long way short of the PSP's opening weekend sales of 185,000 just a few months earlier. *Perfect Dark Zero* was the best-selling game that weekend, followed in order by *Project Gotham Racing 3*, *Call Of Duty 2*, *Condemned: Criminal Origins* and *Need For Speed: Most Wanted*. Japan's launch was rather more muted, with Microsoft reporting sales of 43,970 – a figure *Edge* reported as being "a little under a third of the country's initial shipment". *Ridge Racer 6* was comfortably the most popular launch game there, with 22,276 sales putting it roughly 8,500 ahead of *Perfect Dark Zero* in second place. Still, this was a predictable outcome as the original Xbox had never been popular in Japan. Players were impressed with the hardware, too. "My first true impression of it was when I saw it in-person at a friend's house. Owning a GameCube at the time, I was shocked at just how much of a technical leap the 360 was from the previous generation, especially when getting a proper look at the difference between SD and HD," says Lee Jackson, who worked in QA roles on a variety of Xbox 360 projects.

There was no guarantee that an early launch would work out in the long run, though – after all, Sega had broken launch records with the Dreamcast six years earlier, only to discover that the majority of players were happy to wait to see what the competition had to offer. Nintendo was taking its own route with the Wii, a less powerful system intended to appeal to a wide audience with motion controls. However, Sony seemed to be counting on players waiting, as, "The next generation doesn't start until we say it does," was Kaz Hirai's message for the assembled press at a pre-E3 news conference in 2006. The Xbox 360 had already bolstered its roster of convincingly next-gen games with *Dead Or*

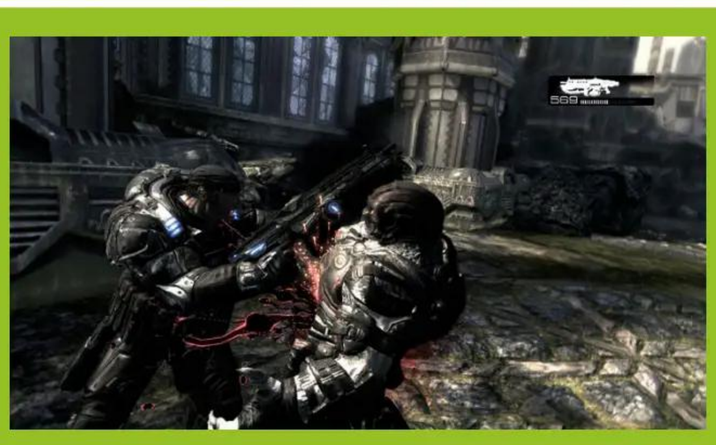
FRANCHISE STARTERS FAMOUS FRANCHISES THAT GOT THEIR

CRACKDOWN

Leaping around as a super-powered police officer in this open-world crime-fighting caper felt great back in 2007, and an Xbox 360 sequel followed in 2010. Unfortunately, *Crackdown 3* suffered delays due to a troubled development, and released on Xbox One to middling reviews in 2019.

DEAD RISING

Capcom's homage to *Dawn Of The Dead* offered plenty of amusing ways to ambush amassed ambulatory corpses. *Dead Rising 2* and two downloadable episodes also appeared on the Xbox 360, and two further main games on later platforms. A remaster of the original was released in 2024.

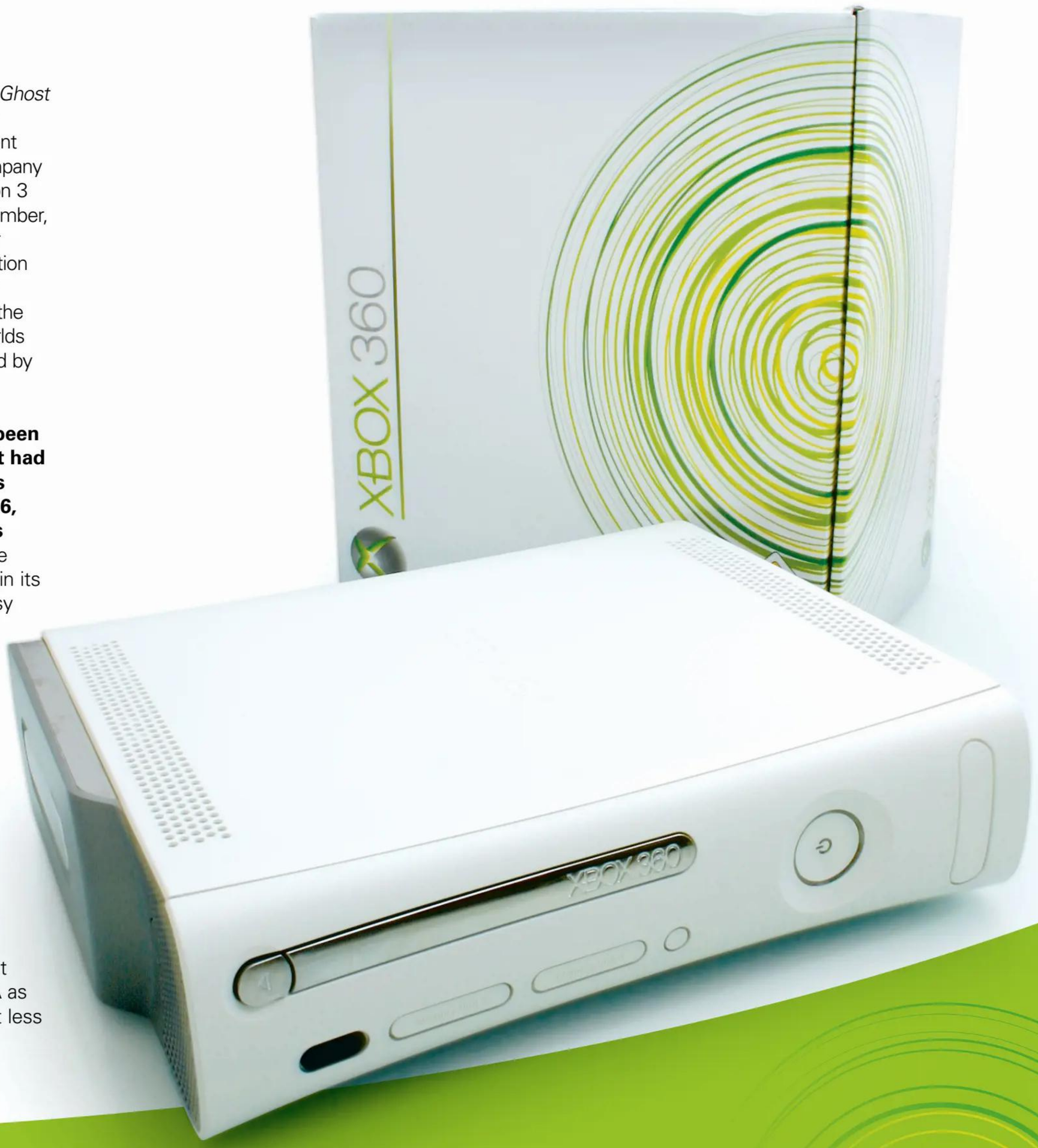


GEARS OF WAR

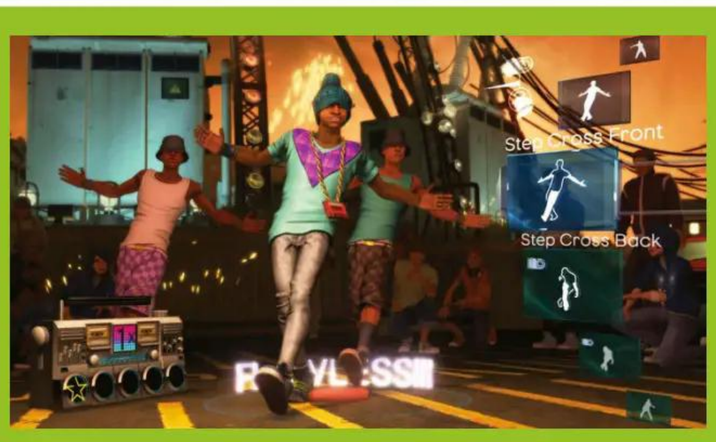
This third-person shooter series is arguably the most recognisable franchise to originate on the Xbox 360, and four games appeared on the console. It's still going strong today – the sixth main instalment, a prequel named *Gears Of War: E-Day*, is scheduled for release in 2026.

Alive 4, *Fight Night Round 3*, *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter* and *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* by then, so that statement felt like desperation from a complacent company caught off-guard. By the time the PlayStation 3 arrived in Japan and North America in November, *Dead Rising*, *Viva Piñata* and *Gears Of War* had joined them. "*Gears* was a stunning action game that made good use of Xbox Live for multiplayer, whilst *Viva Piñata* showed that the 360 was more than capable of creating worlds full of colour and charm, that can be enjoyed by everyone," says Lee.

That early launch had clearly been used effectively, as Microsoft had shipped 10.4 million consoles to retailers by the end of 2006, compared to 1.7 million units of the PlayStation 3. However, one of the reasons that Microsoft was able to maintain its head start was that the Xbox 360 was easy to develop for – a stark contrast to the competition. "Sony, moving from the PS2 to the PS3 era, really pushed the hardware envelope, but that came at a cost," Mike explains. "It forced a lot of teams out of their comfort zones, wrestling with a multi-core architecture that felt alien compared to what came before. It required highly parallelised code which most developers weren't familiar with doing at the time. Microsoft took a different route. By then, most developers were already building PC versions of their games, even if they never shipped them. The Xbox 360 felt familiar. Its development environment was rooted in the same DNA as Windows. For many, that familiarity meant less friction and more focus on creativity." ▶



START ON MICROSOFT'S MOST POPULAR CONSOLE



DANCE CENTRAL

Music game maestro Harmonix created this Kinect-dependent dancing game, which sold in its millions. Two Xbox 360 sequels followed, but with motion controls falling out of favour after *Dance Central Spotlight* arrived on Xbox One, the series moved to Oculus VR devices in 2019.

FORZA HORIZON

Arcade racing is the name of the game in Playground Games' spin-off of Microsoft's flagship racing series. The first two games were released for the Xbox 360, and the sub-series has arguably eclipsed the popularity of the main games in the years since then, with a sixth instalment due in 2026.

SAINTS ROW

While it's fair to say that the first *Saints Row* was a pretty shameless *Grand Theft Auto* imitator, Volition's series soon developed a comedic personality of its own. The first four games and stand-alone expansion *Gat Out Of Hell* are on Xbox 360, with only the 2022 reboot arriving since.

INDEPENDENT SPIRIT

FEW CONSOLES HAVE EVER BEEN AS OPEN TO DEVELOPERS AS THE XBOX 360

While many champion Xbox Live Arcade as one of the best features of the Xbox 360, far fewer mention the Community Games – or Xbox Live Indie Games, as they were later rebranded. These small games developed using Microsoft XNA didn't require formal age ratings or even approval from Microsoft – they were vetted by community members. They could incorporate Avatars but not Achievements, offer a trial period of eight minutes, and could only cost 80, 240 or 400 Microsoft Points.

"While the barrier to entry for XBLA was high, the barrier to entry for XBLIG was virtually nonexistent. And tragically, no one cared," says Ska Studio's founder James Silva. "What XBLIG should have been celebrated for was how well it lowered the bar for hobbyist console development. Never before in history was it so easy for a hobbyist dev to publish a game on a console," he continues. "One consequence of this is that a lot of *incredibly shitty* games launched on XBLIG, and I think that just broke a lot of brains: it was more interesting that the same console that showcased *Forza* and *Gears Of War 2* was now playing a game called *Fart Dating Quiz Massage* than it was that a 16-year-old kid named Bob just released *Dungeons Of Bob*, and now people all over the world could instantly download Bob's first game. When I was 16 I would've murdered for that opportunity."

Despite having already published on XBLA, James released *I MAED A GAM3 W1TH Z0MB1ES 1N IT!!!1* on the Indie Games store, and it became a cult favourite. "I thought it would be a funny joke and was completely blindsided by its success. And it was a totally stealth release, and went viral completely by word of mouth," he recalls. However, developers often complained of poor visibility, and sales could vary wildly – in 2010, developer Todd Snarl told *360* that his platform game *Herman* had sold roughly 30 copies, while the 2011 release *CastleMiner Z* sold 1.5 million copies over about a year and a half.

» [Xbox 360] It's the epic song about making a game with zombies in it that does the trick.

» [Xbox 360] Yuzo Koshiro's studio Ancient released *Protect Me Knight* via the Indie Games scheme.

> "IT FELT LIKE THE XBOX 360 WAS SETTING THE TONE FOR THE GENERATION"
> **JON GORDON**

» [Xbox 360] The online marketplace for DLC gave *Rock Band* greater longevity than on last-gen systems.

» [Xbox 360] *Tekken* was built for PS3-based hardware in arcades, but ran admirably on Microsoft's hardware.

» [Xbox 360] Games like *Shadow Complex* really pushed the limits of what XBLA games offered.

▶ "The [Xbox 360] development kits and supporting software are the best I've ever used. The target hardware was fully integrated with Visual Studio's IDE, making it feel like you were debugging a local PC," says Bone, who remembers the difference in similar terms. "The PlayStation 3 was not a great development machine and Sony were in one of their particularly combative periods. Their attitude was you had to be a 'better developer' to deal with their complex architecture, a real opposite to the accessible Xbox environment. The Cell did have advantages, but to unlock them it cost time, effort and money (or maybe just being 'better')." The result of those developmental struggles was that early multi-platform games did not paint the PlayStation 3 in a flattering light, and while developers got better at working with it, differences could be seen for years to come, which didn't help the far more expensive machine. Its online services also paled in comparison to what the Xbox 360 had to offer. So even with the more established brand joining the market, players had plenty of reasons to choose Microsoft's machine going into 2007. Encouraged by hot exclusives like *Crackdown* and *Forza Motorsport 2*, many did just that.

However, reports of unusually high levels of hardware failures – indicated by three red lights around the power button – had been circulating since the launch of the Xbox 360, and 2007 was the year the 'Red Ring Of Death' became too big to ignore. "There was so much paranoia and confusion. Was it an overheating issue? Was there a soldering problem? I remember messing around a lot with wrapping towels around consoles in the hopes of bringing them back to life," recalls Jon Gordon, who was working on the magazine *360* at the time. "This felt like a new problem after years of consoles being a very reliable and stable gaming platform. Reliability was suddenly a concern where it hadn't needed to be before." Microsoft took decisive action in July 2007. In an open letter to customers, Peter Moore announced that all Xbox 360 consoles would be covered for this issue by an enhanced three-year warranty, and that players who had previously paid for repairs would be reimbursed. The company had to budget a whopping $1.15 billion for this repair scheme, but as Moore recalled in a 2015 IGN podcast, he told Microsoft's CEO Steve Ballmer, "If we don't do this, this brand is dead."

The drastic move paid off, giving existing players a reason to stick with the platform, and new players the confidence to buy into it. It was a good job too, because the second half of the year was packed with great games. "Seeing the Xbox 360 embraced by more and more developers and drawing in big names was very exciting," Jon recalls. "Seeing someone like Hironobu Sakaguchi arrive

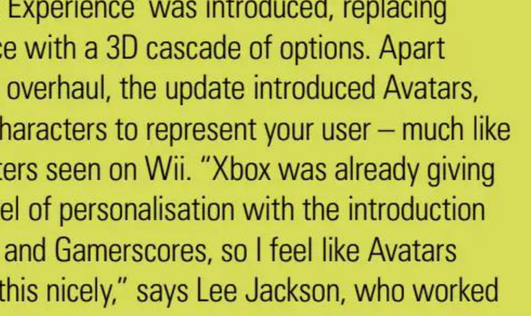
THE CHANGING FACE OF XBOX 360

HOW SYSTEM SOFTWARE UPDATES OVERHAULED THE HARDWARE'S HOME SCREEN

The Xbox 360 arrived at a time when console manufacturers were beginning to issue regular system software updates, designed to add and improve features as well as make hardware more resilient against piracy. Microsoft's efforts went further though, as the Xbox 360 received various updates that refreshed the look and feel of the console dashboard. The console initially launched with the 'Blades' dashboard, a simple but highly functional 2D interface that Mike Mika loved. "It had this clean, almost tactile quality to it, like flipping through the pages of a book," he explains.

The first and most drastic change came in 2008 when the 'New Xbox Experience' was introduced, replacing the old interface with a 3D cascade of options. Apart from the visual overhaul, the update introduced Avatars, customisable characters to represent your user – much like the Mii characters seen on Wii. "Xbox was already giving users some level of personalisation with the introduction of Gamercards and Gamerscores, so I feel like Avatars complimented this nicely," says Lee Jackson, who worked on the Avatar system. "Upon release, the Avatars offered plenty of customisable features, they were integrated into the Xbox 360 UI, and they started to be used in games. It's easy to dismiss them as a Mii clone, but leaving it at that would be a huge disservice to the hard work that the team put into creating them, and the support they received over the remainder of the Xbox 360's lifespan."

The Avatars were a major part of the Kinect games, and the next dashboard was named after the device – it was a relatively minor refresh, essentially flattening out the New Xbox Experience. The final major image change came with the 'Metro' update, which followed the boxy design language introduced in Windows 8. With it came a proliferation of adverts, for everything from Xbox services to films and even alcoholic drinks – a far cry from the simplicity of the Blades era.



» [Xbox 360] The Blades ethos did persist with the page-turning style of the Home button mini-menu.

» [Xbox 360] The Avatars added personality to the system interface, and a new revenue stream for Microsoft.

» [Xbox 360] Here's the Metro interface, giving Jack Daniel's equal prominence to the disc in the console.

» [Xbox 360] *Batman: Arkham Asylum* was a major third-party hit on the console, and looked great.

with *Lost Odyssey* (and, to a lesser extent, *Blue Dragon*) felt like a massive coup for the console. 2007 as a whole was such a massive year of releases with *Mass Effect*, *BioShock*, *The Orange Box*, *Halo 3* and *Call Of Duty 4* all coming out. It felt like the Xbox 360 was setting the tone for the generation."

Despite this, the broad appeal of Nintendo's Wii allowed it to overtake the Xbox 360 in worldwide sales late in 2007. At the same time, analysts from Screen Digest and DFC Intelligence separately forecast that the Xbox 360 would fall behind Sony's console globally, in 2008 and 2009 respectively. But the 2007-2008 financial year was the first full year in which Microsoft's entertainment division actually turned a profit, and the format showed no signs of slowing down despite a major worldwide economic downturn. The Xbox 360 actually occupied a sweet spot, offering more power than the Wii at a significantly cheaper price than the PlayStation 3 – the difference often being as much as £100. It also became clear to players that they wouldn't be leaving their favourite games behind if they chose Xbox 360. When Capcom brought the *Devil May Cry* series to Xbox 360 in February of the same year, it marked the first arrival of a big name that was formerly associated with the PlayStation brand, and when *Grand Theft Auto IV* arrived in 2008, it launched simultaneously on both Sony and Microsoft consoles for the first time ever.

Xbox Live was growing in importance in 2008 too. If your friends had already bought into the Xbox 360, you had a powerful incentive to make the same choice to play online with them. A major push into the video streaming market began with the launch of a Netflix app that offered HD streaming, though subscriptions to both Netflix and Xbox Live Gold were required. Microsoft also ran the first Summer Of Arcade promotion that year, highlighting games like *Bionic Commando Rearmed*, *Castle Crashers* and the hit puzzle platformer *Braid*. "Once games like *Geometry Wars* and *Braid* started turning sizeable profits, everything changed. The success caught the attention of large publishers, and suddenly they wanted in," Mike recalls. "2008 felt like the turning point. *Bionic Commando Rearmed* hit from Capcom, we launched *Super Street Fighter II Turbo HD Remix* and *1942: Joint Strike*, and even the Dreamcast port of *Soulcalibur* showed up that year. It was like Xbox Live Arcade had finally grown up – moving from being a curious download service to a genuine platform, a real distribution pipeline for games. For those of us in the thick of it, you could feel the shift happening in real-time."

As the generation wore on, it was clear that Japanese developers had fully bought

» [Xbox 360] *Trials HD* was one of the XBLA games that proved popular among our interviewees.

Targets killed: 9/13
EXECUTION STREAK
While EXECUTING an enemy, HOLD LB to select your NEXT TARGET and PRESS X to execute him with a SINGLE HIT.

» [Xbox 360] *Assassin's Creed* was one of the third-party franchises that flourished on Microsoft's console.

» [Xbox 360] The *Call Of Duty* games were multi-million sellers, with *Black Ops* being the peak on 360.

» [Xbox 360] Microsoft took the lion's share of *Skyrim*'s launch sales – 59% were on 360.

into the Xbox 360. *Resident Evil* and *Tekken* came to Microsoft hardware for the first time, and while *Final Fantasy XIII* may have launched on PlayStation 3 first in Japan, the English language version launched on both platforms simultaneously. Major franchises rolled on, with new instalments of *Halo* and *Gears Of War*, as well as big third-party hits like *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*. But as the Xbox 360 reached the age at which consoles had traditionally been replaced, it started to muscle in on Nintendo's territory with the addition of motion controls via Kinect. The camera was essentially like a very advanced version of Sony's EyeToy, and became a huge hit – 24 million of them were sold, many in bundles with Xbox 360 hardware, which reached its peak sales in 2010-2011.

Despite its commercial success, today the Kinect suffers from a general apathy towards motion controls. "That generation was an unusually long one compared to console generations past, so the motion gaming boom really extended it out and gave it a few more years of life. In terms of real impact and legacy, however, I don't see a lot of Kinect love out in the world anymore," says Jon. "Personally, I wouldn't consider myself to be part of the intended demographic," concurs Lee, who worked on QA for *Kinect Sports: Season 2*. "Whilst I appreciate Microsoft trying to do something different and ambitious for the time, it never really had any lasting appeal for me. It also felt like it kind of got pigeonholed into being for smaller experiences rather than something like a full-blown single-player adventure." Even so, individual Kinect-dependent titles including *Dance Central* and *Kinect Sports* sold in their millions at the time.

On 22 November 2013, the eighth anniversary of the console's launch, the Xbox 360 was succeeded by the Xbox One. Publishers were still keen to reach as many players as possible, and to that end the Xbox 360 would receive versions of major releases through to the end of 2015, including *Titanfall*, *Destiny*, *Watch Dogs*, *Forza Horizon 2*, *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* and *Rise Of The Tomb Raider*. Releases slowed to a trickle in 2016, with *FIFA 19* and *Just Dance 2019* closing things out in 2018. The Xbox Live Indie Games online store was closed on 7 October 2017 and the Xbox 360's online store as a whole was finally shuttered on 29 July 2024 – though you can still download your previously purchased games at the time of writing.

Unusually, the Xbox 360 was part of a generation in which there was no loser – players got three excellent consoles that received plenty of support. Microsoft managed to ship 84 million consoles by June 2014, making it the manufacturer's most popular console by a comfortable

CLASSIC COMEBACKS MANY PUBLISHERS REVITALISED THEIR

PAC-MAN CHAMPIONSHIP EDITION

Toru Iwatani returned to the arcade hit he created for his final foray into game design, and it was a real treat. It's very much like the original, but you've got five minutes to score as many points as possible inside a maze with regenerating walls and pellets.

SUPER STREET FIGHTER II TURBO HD REMIX

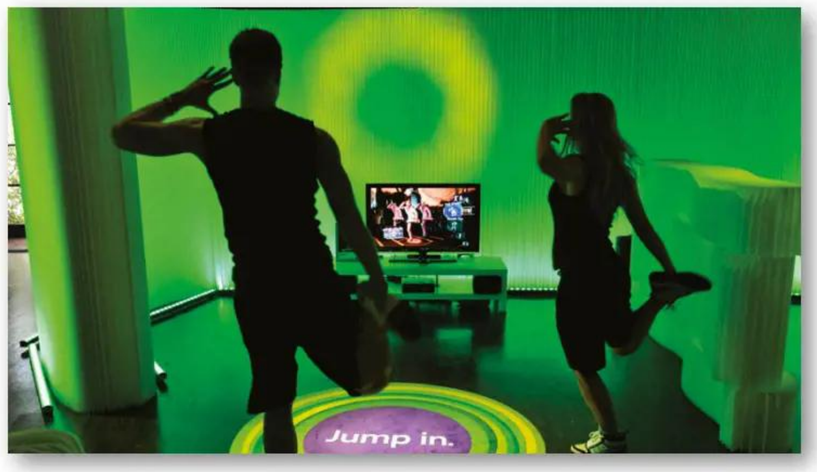
Backbone Entertainment could have just overhauled the graphics and sound for this port, but the team had a more ambitious outlook and aimed to create the ultimate version of the game, implementing tweaks and balance changes.

R-TYPE DIMENSIONS

Irem's classic shoot-'em-ups are always a treat, but this downloadable delight didn't just package the first two arcade games together – developer Tozai Games saw fit to give them a 3D revamp, and you could even switch to the 2D visuals with a single button press.

» [Xbox 360] If you doubted the 360's family appeal, *Minecraft* sold a whopping 22 million copies on the console.

» [Xbox 360] Even late into the generation, some multi-platform games like *Bayonetta* ran significantly better on the 360.



» [Xbox 360] *Dance Central* was one of the Kinect games that really hooked casual players in 2010.

» [Xbox 360] Games like *The Simpsons* got their first arcade-perfect home ports via XBLA.

» [Xbox 360] Kinect games were often targeted to a wide audience, and many used the Avatars.

margin. Sony may have lost its position as market leader, but its commitment to the PlayStation 3 did eventually pay off, as the console surpassed its rival in December 2012 and eventually shipped a total of 87.4 million units. Nintendo maintained its overall lead and eventually shipped 101 million Wii consoles, beating both of the more powerful machines. But you'd be forgiven if that picture doesn't match your memories, as the Xbox 360 also claimed some victories late in its life, surpassing Nintendo's motion-controlled phenomenon in the UK in 2013 and the USA in 2014, becoming the top-selling console of the generation in both regions.

> "THE GAMES, NO MATTER THEIR SIZE OR SCOPE, FELT LIKE THEY ALL HAD A PLACE ON THAT SYSTEM"
> **MIKE MIKA**

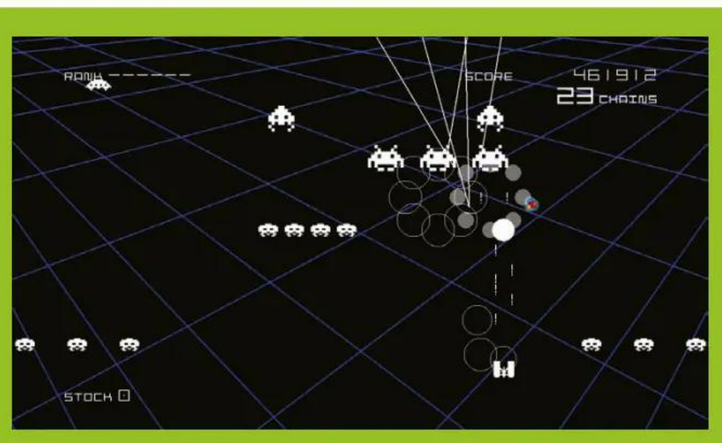
To date, the Xbox 360 is Microsoft's most popular console, so what did it do right? "I think the success of the Xbox 360 has a lot to do with good timing," says Jon. "That doesn't mean it was luck, but rather the preparation that had been made came off at just the right time. Xbox Live was ready to go and offered a largely stable and well-connected online experience just when developers were ready to really take advantage of that." Mike adds, "The library was varied – a mix of experimental games and blockbuster franchises that somehow coexisted. Then came the Avatars, the Kinect… it all felt so forward-looking, like Microsoft was genuinely trying to imagine what the next decade of play might be. There was an optimism to it. The games, no matter their size or scope, felt like they all had a place on that system."

Indeed, the Xbox 360 is a system that hosted cutting-edge stuff like *Gears Of War*, but gave second chances to games like *Guardian Heroes*. A console where *Halo* and *Call Of Duty* dominate the best-sellers list, that somehow also became a haven for fans of Cave shoot-'em-ups. In many ways, the console was the gateway from the past to the present – a system that introduced HD visuals and turned games like *Rock Band* into platforms for DLC, but still has that classic console immediacy, where you can pop the disc in and go without lengthy installations. The Xbox 360 is still an amazing console 20 years from its launch, so if you've not given yours some love for a while, this anniversary is the perfect time to do it. ✱

RETRO HITS VIA XBOX LIVE ARCADE – HERE ARE SOME OF OUR FAVOURITES

HYDRO THUNDER HURRICANE

Midway Games had ceased to be when this sequel to its arcade speedboat racer arrived, with Vector Unit handling development and Microsoft publishing. The game captures the spirit of the original, with creative courses, all manner of shortcuts to discover and plenty of boost fuel.

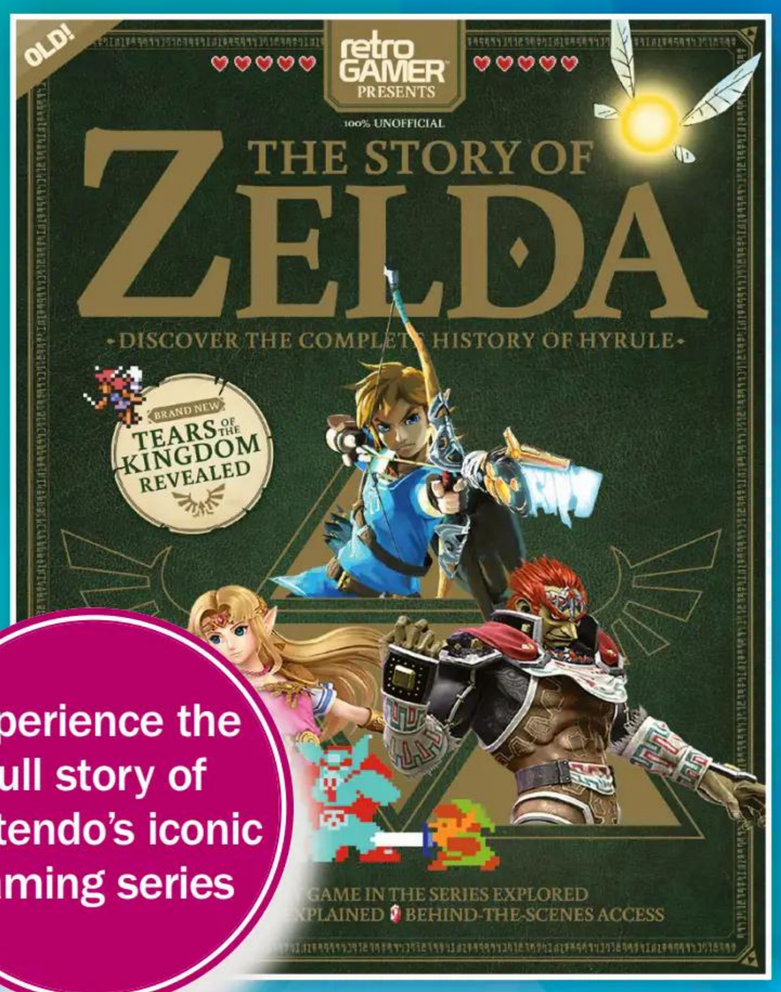


SPACE INVADERS: INFINITY GENE

Forget what you know about Taito's classic Seventies shoot-'em-up – this is a fast-paced and stylish take on *Space Invaders* that introduces chain combos, free movement and much more. *Space Invaders Extreme* is also available on the console and well worth checking out too.

HARD CORPS: UPRISING

Konami handed the reins of the *Contra* series to Arc System Works for this run-and-gun, and you can just see that in the sprite work and hear it in Daisuke Ishiwatari's guitar riffs. This one's a brand-new prequel to both *Contra* and the Mega Drive game it's named after.



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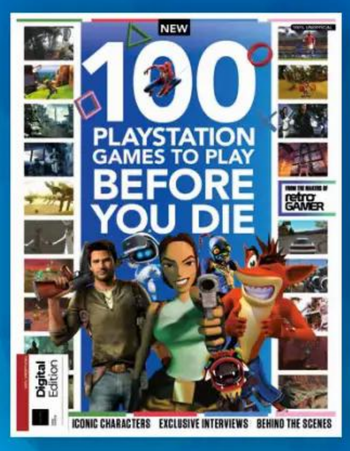

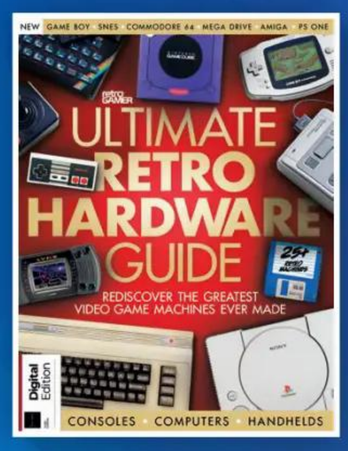
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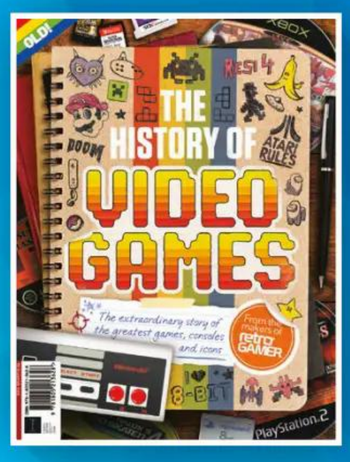
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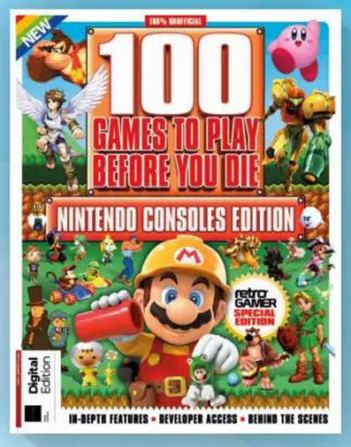
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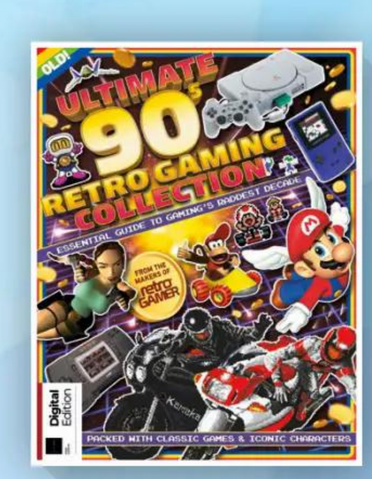
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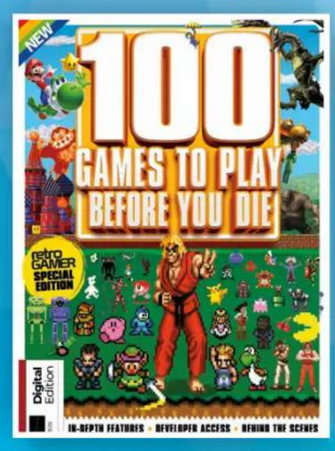
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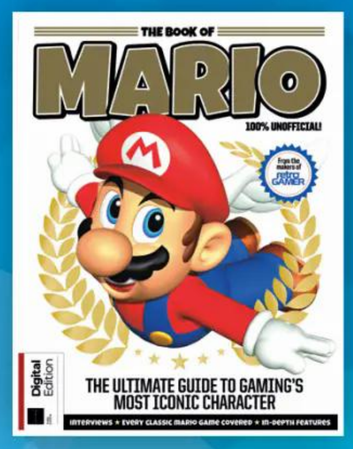

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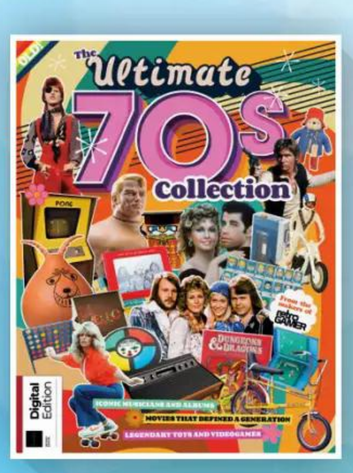

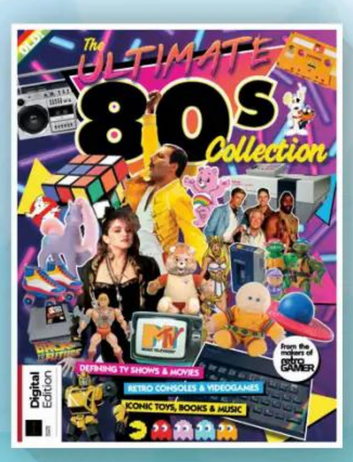

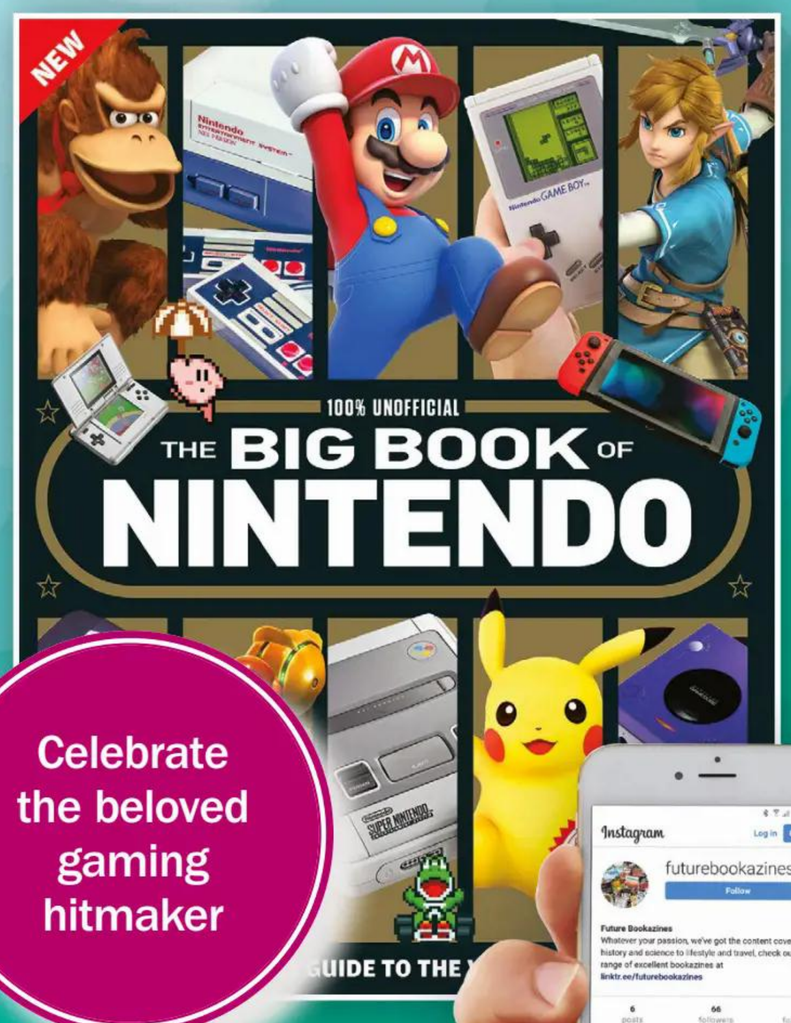

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